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MAGAZINE

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v3i4 .Voodle, Shika, Lou & Okar



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Sexual Themes
Strong Language

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Games for Windows

PLAYSTATION 3

MSE

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Publisher
Tim Lindquist
Editor in Chief
Greg Off
greg@hardcoregamer.com
Art Director
Terry Wolfinger
Senior Editor
Thomas Wilde
Managing Editor
Alicia Ashby
Editors
Anthony Mertz **Danny Cowan**
Dave Hulegaard **David Brothers**
Geson Hatchett **Iain Ross**
Jason Venter **James Cunningham**
Jeremy Peeples **Ken Horowitz**
Steven Kent **Thomas Shin**
Elizabeth Ellis **Jeb Haught**
Abbie Heppe
The Drill Instructor
James Cunningham
Artist
Amadeo Garcia III
Production Director
Brady Hartel
Production Artists
John McKechnie **David Silviera**
Casey Yates **Julie Miyamoto**
Translator
Elizabeth Ellis
Ad sales
Burr Hilsabeck
415-412-5685
burr@hardcoregamer.com
Games Daishi
Martin Gilbert
Customer Service
425-868-2216

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Biographical Data

DKJFLS
hardcoregamer.com



DJPubba_Tim Lindquist

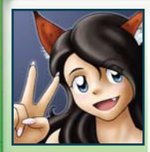
To date, my collecting obsession has been limited to classic arcade games. Now, after stumbling across some fantastic retro console deals online, I've been bitten by another bug. I've been obtaining old carts and systems at an alarming rate and the fact that most non-collectors are willing to give up their stuff for practically nothing isn't helping. Working C64 with monitor: free; 12 carts for it: $7; working Atari XEGS: $24.
Now Playing: *Mr. Robot and his Robot Factory, Kaboom!*



Wanderer_Thomas Wilde

It turns out that the li'l dwarf warrior I've been leveling in my copious spare time has, by total accident, a pretty good PVP build. Wolfie's rogue is about to get its *face caved in*.

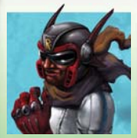
Now Playing: *Jeanne d'Arc, Tabula Rasa, World of Warcraft*



Lynxara_Alicia Ashby

A LIGHT'S SHINING ON MY HEART
MEMORY A FORK AT THE LEFT
RAYS BURNING THRU THE CLOUDS
FROM THE SKY UP ABOVE

Now Playing: *Luminous Arc, Persona 3, Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness, Final Fantasy Tactics: The War of the Lions*



Racewing_Geson Hatchett

First Sega lightens and smoothes out Vanessa Lewis, then Namco gives *Soul Calibur*'s entire female cast ridiculous boob jobs, *then* Neversoft kills Judy Nails's smile. I feel like I've… *failed*, somehow. I don't even want to *think* about what Falcoon's up to. Thank goodness for Nintendo, who seems to be bent on actually *improving* their character designs. I'll be first in line for *Brawl*.
Now Playing: *Persona 3*, *Resident Evil 4: Wii Edition*, *Guilty Gear XX Accent Core* **(PS2)**



Daniel Kayser_Daniel Kayser

I write this bio while at GC in Leipzig, Germany. I'm a long way from home and a longer way from keeping my sanity, but alas, I'm staying focused… on the beer. Weinerschnitzel or bust!



KouAidou_Elizabeth Ellis

I've become something of a reality TV whore. This season, I'm watching "Top Chef," "So You Think You Can Dance," "Last Comic Standing," "America's Got Talent," and "Who Wants To Be A Superhero," whilst waiting eagerly for "Survivor: China" and the new season of "Project Runway." I also enjoy the occasional episode of "Supernanny" and "Shalom in the Home." These are *real life skills* I'm learning here, people!!
Now Playing: *Picross DS*, *Overlord*



Roger Danish_Greg Off

It's Peanut Butter Jelly Time!

Peanut Butter Jelly, Peanut Butter Jelly, Peanut Butter Jelly with a Baseball Bat!

Now playing: *Ratchet & Clank Future: Tools of Destruction, Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, Warhawk, BioShock*



4thletter_David Brothers

I made a grave mistake last month when I forgot to thank the lovely Carissa along with the rest of the Isotope gang. Will she ever forgive my error? What will be my penance? To be continued, true believer.

Now Reading: *Narcoleptic Sunday, Exterminators, …said the shotgun to the head.*



James_James Cunningham

After months of joblessness, having to get up at the ungodly hour of 7AM every day to make money is killing me. Apparently it's possible to go to bed before the sun comes up, but I'm not sure why anyone would want to. Still, it's nice to be able to afford all the stuff I want to buy, especially with *Rock Band* looking to cost roughly $1,000,000,000 for game and drums.
Now Playing: *Space Giraffe, BioShock* **(360)**



HonestGamer_Jason Venter

Moving across the state can be rough, but that's what handheld gaming systems are for. Now that I have an apartment, I can't wait to set up my home office (read: gaming room) and hook up some consoles again. I'm back in the game just in time for the holiday rush!

Now Playing: *Tales of the World: Radiant Mythology*, *Final Fantasy II* **(PSP)**, *Taito Legends: Power-Up*



Hitoshura_Iain Ross

When I went to go pick up a copy of *Persona 3*, I dropped off a bunch of the guides for it at the store. The shock on their faces after they asked me where I got so many of them was worth a portion of the game's cost, since one of the clerks insisted on paying me for a copy of the guide.

Now Playing: *Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness*



Sardius_Danny Cowan

I didn't do jack for this issue! I'll be back to rattle cages and ruffle feathers in the unattended pet store that is the gaming industry very soon, though. I will not rest until every single niche publisher in the world is angry at me! Next up: Natsume. You're going *down*, Office Cat.

Now Playing: *Harvest Moon: Boy & Girl*, *Comix Zone*, *Legend of the Blob Bros. 2*, *La La Land 5*



Princess Cowboy_Abbie Heppe

Like any good gamer, I decided to get out the house and get some fresh air and ended up racing a sailboat off the coast of Maine. Long story short, we ran into some extremely dangerous weather, and while it was exhilarating, I'm glad to be back to where getting killed just means you restart the checkpoint.

Now Playing: *BioShock*, *Metroid Prime 3*



Wolfie_Terry Wolfinger

Get *"my face caved in?!!!"* Oh I don't think so, my dwarf-ish friend. I'm already piecing together my Arena Gladiator armor, Bee-otch! It is now, as they say, *on!* So Wanderer… why don't you QQ more, noob! *HOOLIGANS… OY!* /belch

Now Playing: *World of Warcraft*



Metalbolt_Anthony Mertz

It's only the second day of school and I'm pretty sure they're inadvertently training us to be stenographers! So much typing. Too much typing. All of this typing and no zombies in sight. This is just wrong!

Now Playing: *MDK2* **(PC)**



Arbeth_Thomas Shin

Back in the days of blocky heads and pointy toes, *System Shock 2* was one of those games that I hated to love, because nobody would believe me when I told them that the elevator shaft was jammed with worms. Hopefully, *BioShock* won't trigger any new neuroses in my already fragile psyche, or I'll summon forth my Persona for reals.

Now Playing: *BioShock*, *Big Bang Beat*, *Persona 3*



Ashura_Brady Hartel

They announced *Metal Gear β Online: Version* at the Metal Gear 20th Anniversary party, and they're still mopping up my froth. As of this writing, they are currently running a beta test in Japan that I wish I was in on soooo badly. Here's hoping they run an English one! By the time this issue actually gets into your hands, though, it'll be my Birthday, and I'll be 26. Yay.
Now Playing: *Bomberman Live*, *Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness*



Jeremy_Jeremy Peeples

Since *Fire Pro Wrestling Returns* is finally getting a U.S. release, I've been playing every entry in the series that I could get my hands on to prepare, and now cannot wait for *Returns*, so I can finally make use of the revamped wrestler creation mode and ring/logo editor. Outside of Fire Pro, I've been dabbling in *DiRT*, the demos for *Bioshock* and *Beautiful Katamari*, and a slew of DC classics.
Now playing - *Fire Pro Wresting 1/2/D/Premium X, Crazy Taxi, Shenmue, Jet Grind Radio, Toukon Retsuden 3/4*



Mads_Amadeo Garcia III

The art monkey's gotten his hands on some spiritual crack, and it's pedal to the metal as far as drawing more and better stuff goes. Unfortunately, this leaves very little time for me to be a gamer. Does being excited over the *Dungeons and Dragons* 4th Edition release count? It *should* — if all goes well, that engine will run half the western RPGs you'll be playing in the next decade!
Now Playing: *Bully*, *The Misadventures of Tron Bonne*, *City of Villains* **(just the char-gen, HONEST!)**



Big Wynn_Jeb Haught

I'm not disappointed that *Age of Conan* was delayed until early next year. Now I will actually have time to play the plethora of new releases this holiday season. Besides, March is a nice month to hibernate… especially when the sun is out to get you!

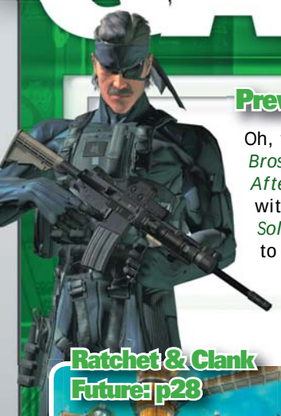
Now Playing: *Call of Duty 4* **(360)**, *Jeanne d'Arc*, *BioShock* **(360)**

HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE

Contents

Previews

Oh, the things we have for you this month. Exclusive *Super Smash Bros.* screens? Look no further. The first English screens of *Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness*? It's all here, baby. We blended this with equal portions of *Lost Odyssey*, *Metal Gear Solid 4*, *Super Mario Galaxy*, and *Call of Duty 4* to create a delicious preview salad, dusted lightly with *Ratchet & Clank Future* and a little *Age of Conan* on the side. Your order is waiting on page 12.







Ratchet & Clank Future: p28



Lost Odyssey: p18

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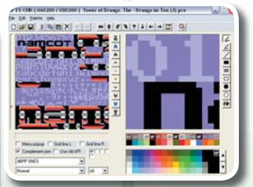
For our first act, watch as a single man creates a translation patch for the NES Namco classic *The Tower of Druaga*... *without knowing any Japanese*. Then, be shocked and amazed as Michael Tomasson of Good Deal Games shows you the mysteries of the Classic Gaming Expo, where classic consoles roam and homebrew titles for everything from the Sega CD to the Atari 2600 are unveiled. The show begins on page 32.



CGE2K7

Fantranning: p38







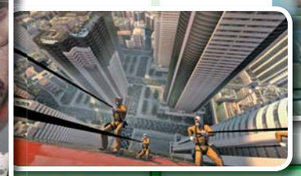
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On the cover

It's Kane & Lynch! One is a criminal genius, the other's insane. We sent David Brothers to Eidos to get an in-depth, hands-on look at this upcoming co-op title, set for launch on the Xbox 360 and PC. What do the makers of *Hitman: Blood Money* do when asked to come up with a completely immersive, action-packed action title? It looks like they go a little crazy and make the caper movie from hell. Check it out on page 42.









KANE & LYNCH DEAD MEN

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WORLD OF MONEY



The subscription-based MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, last year's best-selling game, is continuing to fuel Sierra's revenues, as quarterly results were 68.9% higher than the same period last year. *WoW: The Burning Crusade* sold nearly 2.4 million copies in the first twenty-four hours, with Blizzard announcing that *WoW* has reached no fewer than nine million subscribers, with *The Burning Crusade* yet to launch in China.



NEW KIDS ON THE BLOCK

Codemasters has opened a third development studio, UK-based Codemasters Studios Guildford (Southam and Kuala Lumpur being the other two), which will initially assist with the next installments in the *Operation Flashpoint* and *Race Driver* series, and with the company's proprietary middleware engine, Neon.

Blazing Lizard is a new game development studio founded by ex-Volition members, who worked on titles such as *Saints Row*, the *Red Faction*. series, the *Summoner* series, *The Punisher*, *Freespace*, and *Elite Force 2*.

Four former Mumbojumbo developers, known for the casual game series *Luxor*, have teamed up with the head of Method Solutions to start a new studio, Slapdash Games, which will create casual cross-platform games for all ages and demographics.

Bethesda Softworks parent company ZeniMax Media has created ZeniMax Online Studios, headed by former Mythic founder Matt Firor, which will focus on the MMO market segment.





GAME ANNOUNCEMENTS AND DELAYS

Developer Tragnarion Studios will use Epic's Unreal Engine 3 for its new multiplatform shooter *The Scourge Project*, a story-driven FPS game built from the ground up for co-op squad play, where up to four players will experience a personal story.

While Ubisoft revealed that *Splinter Cell: Conviction* has been delayed until January-March of 2008, it also announced that it will develop and publish a game based on 20th Century Fox's *Avatar*, the story of an ex-Marine who finds himself thrust into hostilities on an alien planet filled with exotic life forms, written and directed by Academy Award-winning filmmaker James Cameron (*Titanic*, *Aliens*, *Terminator*, etc.). Ubisoft also confirmed that it's developing a third-person action game based on the "Heroes" TV series. The video game will focus on the entire cast, and not re-tell or bridge the gap between the two seasons, but instead offer its own insight.

EA has a few unannounced titles in development, such as a superhero fighting game using the Marvel license by its Chicago studio, known for the *Fight Night* series and *Def Jam Icon*; it's scheduled for release on PS3 and X360 in 2008. EA Games's Frank Gibeau confirmed at a shareholder meeting that it has several mature titles in development, one of which is *The Godfather 2*. On the other hand, *Crysis* and *FIFA '08* are being pushed back until November, while *Spore* is being given extra time for polishing and is tentatively scheduled for release anywhere from March to May 2008.

During THQ's Q1 2008 financial conference call, CEO Brian Farrell confirmed it's developing *Red Faction 3*, but didn't give further details. During Midway's financial conference call, it announced *BlackSite: Area 51* has been pushed back to early November 2007, while *Vin Diesel's Wheelman* got bumped all the way to 2008.

A few months ago, Take-Two promised it would not delay *Grand Theft Auto IV* from its previously announced October 16, 2007, release date, but there seems to have been a change of heart. We won't see the next-gen *GTA* installment until Q2 2008, which is February to April 2008.

Majesco's *Cooking Mama 2* was announced, promising new recipes, twice as many mini-games and an all-new multiplayer mode.

Sony Online Entertainment is teaming up with Sir Richard Branson and Deepak Chopra's Virgin Comics to bring the popular, India-based *Ramayan 3392 A.D.* comic book universe to life as an MMO, initially for the PC.

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Mild Language
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Jump in.

XBOX 360 LIVE

PLATFORM Wii

SUPER SMASH BROS. BRAWL

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Sora
Release Date: 12/3/2007
Genre: 3D Fighter
Number of Players: 1-4



Preview by **Princess Cowboy**

If there was one game we wished Nintendo would've let us put our anxious little paws on at E3, it would probably be *Super Smash Bros. Brawl*. Instead, there's been a steady trickle of new information to hold us over until the game's December release.

Here's a quick review of the summer announcements. Joining the game's already A-list line-up will be Pit, hailing from *Kid Icarus*, who wields the dual-bladed Sacred Bow of Palutena; Ike from *Fire Emblem*; Wario, who relies on karate and not frantic mini-games here; and the Pokemon Trainer who will show you his Pokeymans: Squirtle, Ivysaur, and Charizard. Along with the new characters, of course, comes new levels; Ike brings the Castle Siege stage, Kid Icarus offers a Skyworld level with a destructible floor and wait... what? *Animal Crossing* is making an appearance too, and just like the original Nintendo DS game, time will change with your console's internal clock. If you time it right, you may see some familiar faces like K.K. Slider. (Now, if only you got the chance to Final Smash Tom Nook...)

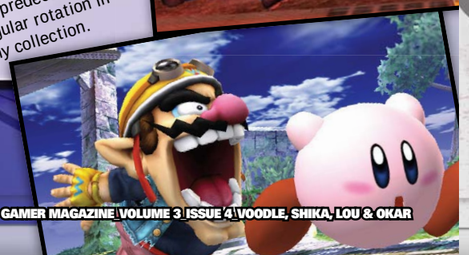
It's worth mentioning the Subspace Emissary, the fleshed out, side-scrolling single player component to *Brawl*. The Emissary's goal is to create playability for those of us without friends — I mean, elaborate on the back story to *Brawl* and give an idea what's at stake for each character. Sweet!





It's also great to see that *Brawl* will be playable on any and all Wii compatible controllers (that's Classic, sideways Wii Remote, Wii Remote and nunchuck, and GameCube), giving me a good excuse to dust off those Cube controllers and stop living in fear of having to learn a new control scheme. The more *Brawl* has to offer, the better. Six and eight years later, its predecessors still make the regular rotation in my collection.





PLATFORM PSP

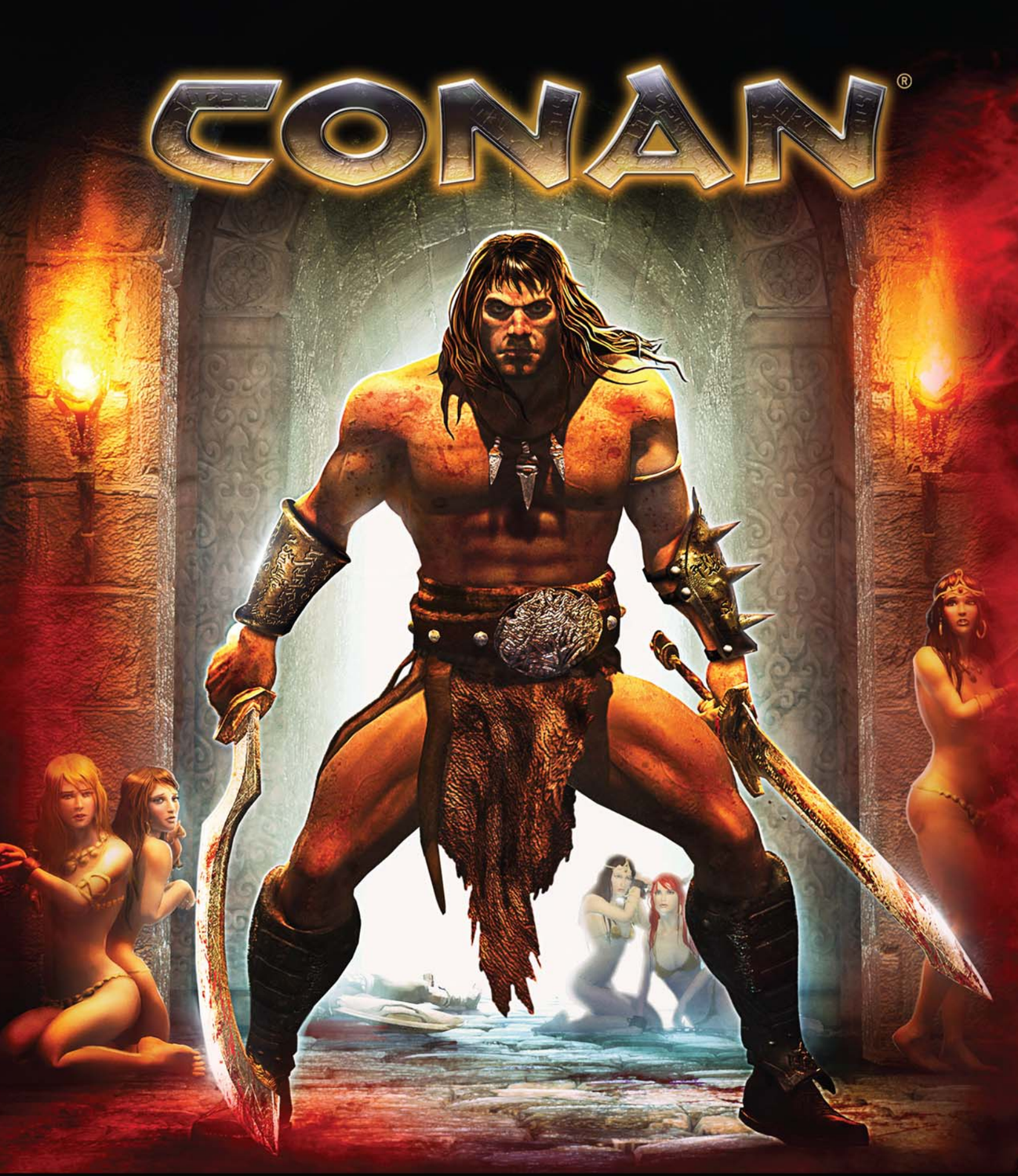


Afternoon of Darkness is a lot more than just the English version of the game formerly known as *Disgaea Portable*. In addition to a pixel-perfect port of the original *Disgaea* supplemented by new stages, a new "music shop" option that lets you spend HL to acquire bonus songs to listen to while while you're grinding through Item World, and a bonus "Etna Mode" storyline (check out our exclusive shots!), *Afternoon of Darkness* offers Wi-Fi multiplayer features that are exclusive to the English version of the game. Our last preview announced the new ad-hoc multiplayer, and this time we've got a lot more details about how it works and why you should care about it. You initiate multiplayer by talking to a character called the Communicator (a Prinny in a maid outfit) that hangs around in Laharl's room after you finish the Tutorial levels. Talking to the Communicator lets you enter Network Mode, where you can opt to "sell" items to your friends or have a battle using customized rules.

The item-selling option lets you sell copies of any items you've got in your Shopping Bag to your friends at half their usual shop price. This lets you help buddies fill out their item collections and get to certain unlockables more quickly. Multiplayer battles use radically different rules than the main game, with special abilities disabled and no XP gained. Instead, players gain points to keep track of their victories in the 8-vs-8 melees, either by wasting entire teams or wasting the team's Leader, ala *Soul Nomad*. Both players can manipulate the outcome of the battle by using Geo Cubes to cast special effects... but the Geo Cubes demand Geo Souls, and you only gain one Geo Soul each turn.

The core game is still as fun as it ever was, and its fast bursts of tactical action are really perfect for portable gaming. On a technical level, the port is still amazing, without any load time issues at all. A few extra gameplay tweaks (like XP gains for Clerics when they Heal) and online multiplayer instead of ad hoc would've been great, but it's hard to complain. *Disgaea: Afternoon of Darkness* is the kind of game the PSP's needed for a long, long time.

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TONY HAWK'S PROVING GROUND

Publisher: Activision
Developer: Neversoft (PS3, 360) Page 44 (PS2, Wii) Vicarious Visions (DS)

Release Date: Fall 2007
Genre(s): Freeform skating
of Players: 1-?



Preview by Jeremy

Tony Hawk's Proving Ground is all about freedom, and Neversoft is set to make this the entry in the series with the most customization options and freedom for the player. While it's been long-praised for its innovation, this newest offering is set to offer an unparalleled level of creation tools and customization features for player-created characters. New to the series is a video editor that allows you to create your own skate videos, capturing your greatest moments (and presumably) most painful follies.

Also new is a virtual skate lounge that can be tricked out with plasma screens and high-end furniture, and also allows players to track their own stats, or meet new players in their own tricked out lounge. Players will also have the freedom to shift from single-player and multi-player gameplay seamlessly, and carry their single-player career mode stats over to its online counterpart.

New Nail the Trick moves, and new gameplay mechanics such as skateable terrain altering, building, and bowl carving shine brightly as debuting gameplay features. The career mode will now allow you to develop into one of three types of skater - the contest-winning "career athlete", a swift "hardcore skater" who dazzles with flash, or a "rigger", who perverts the terrain into his own vision to achieve skating nirvana. Each of the styles will have their own unique Nail the Trick moves, adding even more depth to the gameplay and allowing the different skating styles to stand out more. This new free-form gameplay will show off in-game locales like Washington D.C., Philadelphia, and Baltimore.

Freedom is the name of the game in this year's *Tony Hawk* installment, and so far, it looks like Neversoft's lofty goals about bringing it to the skating genre will be achieved, giving players the deepest and most customizable entry in the series to date.

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PlayStation 2

TEEN T
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Mild Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Alcohol and Tobacco
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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PLATFORM XBOX 360



Lost Odyssey™

Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: Microsoft
Developer: Mistwalker
Release Date: 2008

Genre(s): Console RPG
Category: Not *Final Fantasy* Really
of Players: 1

There is absolutely no point in not saying this: *Lost Odyssey* is a new *Final Fantasy* game in all but name, and that much is obvious in the first thirty seconds of seeing it in action.

The sarcastic among you, who I count as my tribesmen, are laughing and saying "No, really? *Mistwalker* and all of its ex-Square Enix employees made a game like *FF*?!" That was Lynxara's reaction.

The point being, of course, that it is not merely *FF*-influenced; it's basically a direct across-the-board homage. Change the spell names and the game's title, and you would have a next-generation *FF* game.

Lost Odyssey is a meditation on memory and loss (Hironobu Sakaguchi describes it as an "emotional rollercoaster"), and it's also about a guy with a sword beating up robots. Kaim has been alive for a thousand years, none of which he remembers, and he's now right in the middle of a magically-powered civil war. With three different nations fighting for control of a new mystical power source, Kaim and his friends must fight to stay alive while Kaim slowly regains his memory.

It's forty hours or more of cinematically-designed, turn-based combat interspersed with high-definition cutscenes. It's the Platonic ideal of the late-nineties Japanese RPG, and it's an Xbox 360 exclusive. Next week: more signs of the apocalypse.

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TEEN T CONTENT RATED BY ESRB Mild Language Violence

PC DVD-ROM SOFTWARE

PLAYSTATION 3

XBOX 360 LIVE

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After a long hiatus, Mario is back and wackier than ever in the much anticipated Wii title, *Super Mario Galaxy*. Only this time, there is no sunshine to bathe in as the beloved plumber traverses the deep reaches of space, hopping from asteroid to asteroid in his never-ending quest to gather golden coins and stars. Will he ever seek rehab for his addiction to bling? Will he continue his genocidal slaughter of every creature that isn't human? Will he and Princess Peach ever find true happiness? Read on, oh faithful fan, read on.

Although this game is set in space, Mario still retains his signature moves, like relentlessly stomping on the heads of enemies, grabbing his hat while ducking and munching magic mushrooms. New to his repertoire is the devastating spin attack. With arms held sideways, Mario makes a fist with each mitt and spins in place, knocking nearly everything he touches into oblivion. Performing this move is as simple as shaking the Wiimote. In addition, shaking it also activates giant gold stars that propel him to the next planetoid. Another new move is the long jump, which is activated by holding down the Z-button and A-button simultaneously. Triple jumps are also possible by pressing the A-button with the right timing.

Using the motion-sensing controller, players can pick up items just by pointing at them and pressing the B-button. Certain enemies can also be 'shot' with projectiles using the same move. Directing Mario's acrobatics feels very natural using the new controller, and just like previous titles, his movements are controlled with the C-stick.

Another feature that may... ahem... "bee" of concern is the ability to transform into Bee Mario. When this power-up is discovered, it changes Mario into an adorable bee for a short time so he can fly up to high areas. The timer only lasts a few moments before it turns him back into his hippity-hoppity self, and contact with enemies or water also deactivates the power-up.

With his feet planted firmly on the ground, Mario defies gravity by running around floating spheres and platforms. Grabbing power-ups and jumping around while hanging upside down may seem a bit disorienting at first, but it gives the player an unprecedented amount of possibilities. When the path to rescuing Princess Peach is this much fun, she may be waiting a long time for her plumber in shining overalls.

SUPER MARIO GALAXY™

Preview by Big Worm

Publisher: Nintendo
Developer: Nintendo
Release Date: November
Genre: Platformer
Number of Players: 1

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Preview by Big Worm

CALL OF DUTY 4 MODERN WARFARE™



Publisher: Activision
Developer: Infinity Ward
Release Date: 11/2007

Genre(s): First Person Shooter
Category: Real World Mayhem
of Players: 1-16 (Online)







At a recent *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* event in LA, I was able to get my hands on the controller, and while router issues prevented us from playing it online, we did get to enjoy twelve-player LAN. By the end of the session, I was eager for more, but I'm happy to report that the game plays as well as it looks. Every screenshot and movie of the game sports such realistic visuals that you will probably ask yourself if they have been 'touched up,' but trust me, they haven't. A smooth frame rate helps to immerse players in the intense combat, and special RPG-like abilities add a unique amount of customization to gameplay.

To begin with, typical soldier classes such as Sniper and Rifleman are available that offer pre-determined weapon loadouts. In addition, players can create and save custom classes that contain their favorite armaments. Up to twenty passive "Perks" add another dimension to customization since three of them can be active at any time. Deep Impact (not the movie, thankfully) allows bullets to pierce walls, Extreme Conditioning lets players sprint longer distances, and Eavesdrop reveals the conversations of nearby enemy players.

Further customization occurs on the battlefield that rewards skilled players with additional abilities. For instance, scoring three kills in a row gives access to a UAV that displays the location of enemies for thirty seconds, while five kills in a row opens up the ability to call in artillery. Although these are one-use features, they can have a devastating effect in the heat of battle.

Those familiar with previous *CoD* titles will be able to jump right into the action since the controls are almost identical. Perhaps the only differences are in using the aforementioned non-passive abilities, which are linked to the D-pad. These simple controls help to even out the fast-paced action since it only takes a few shots to end up six feet underground. Personally, I welcome such realism because I get tired of having to empty a full clip into someone before they drop.

Some may wonder if the change from WWII to contemporary combat was a good choice. After playing *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, it's obvious that Infinity Ward has another hit on its hands.

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XBOX 360 LIVE

METAL GEAR SOLID 4

GUNS OF THE PATRIOTS TACTICAL ESPIONAGE ACTION

PUBLISHER: KONAMI · DEVELOPER: KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS · GENRE: NOWHERE TO HIDE
CATEGORY: HIDING NOWHERE · RELEASE DATE: EARLY 2008 · # PLAYERS: 1-?

Preview by Ashura

Every *Metal Gear* fan has wanted to see actual gameplay since *Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots* was announced. Sure, all of these cutscene trailers have been pretty nifty, but really, how is the game going to play? Hideo Kojima had a fifteen-minute long gameplay demonstration at the Metal Gear 20th Anniversary party that's so detailed, in fact, that it's the closest thing to actually playing the game you can currently get.

In the demo we find an aged Snake caught in the middle of a battle between two factions: PMCs (Private Military Companies) and the local resistance forces. The catchphrase "Nowhere to hide" is finally put into practice, and it is shown that Snake can approach the situations he finds himself in many different ways. He can Rambo through, he can sneak-it stealth-it, he can ally himself with the PMCs, or he can help the rebellion! This affects how people perceive you, how you perceive other people, and may effect things such as what kind of resources you have access to. The 3D Camera from *MGS3:S* returns, though the big reveal is that you will be able to play the game like an FPS if you wish. This is all in the interest of giving players a choice in how they approach the game, and in turn making it more accessible to players all over the world.

Everyone's favorite standbys aren't missing, either. The AK47, MK22, and of course the RPG 7 (which you can now walk with while aiming) are all there. Most things that return are improved much like the RPG, with grenades now sporting *Gears of War*-style aiming, and a ring around Snake that helps reveal sounds and vibrations around him (much like *Portable Ops*). There's also the girly magazines, and even the drum can from *MG2: Solid Snake* returns, only now you can roll over enemies with it. The camo system from *MGS3* is back on steroids in the form of Octocam. It's a cross between the old system, the stealth camo, and something entirely new: Snake can now mimic the textures of the walls and floor he's hiding on, helping him further blend into the background. Oh, yeah, and you can use the tiny Metal Gear MK.II to shock people in the nuts! Kojima's team seems to have finally found their balance between realism and surrealism, and it's going to be a long wait until 2008!

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SOCOM U.S. NAVY SEALS TACTICAL STRIKE

Publisher: Sony
Developer: Sony
Release Date: October
Genre(s): Squad-Based Strategy
of Players: 1-4 (Online)



Preview by Big Worm

In August, Sony held a gaming event at an Airsoft compound to promote *SOCOM US Navy Seals Tactical Strike*. During this awesome affair, authentic Navy Seals ran five-man journalist teams through special recreations of missions from the game. First we donned facemasks, camouflage gear, and knee pads, then we got to select from a myriad of rubber-bb shooting recreations of real-life weaponry (I chose an MP5, and later, a G3). As we entered the dark warehouse, smoke obscured our vision while spotlights illuminated dilapidated buildings, abandoned cars, a water fountain, and even a fruit stand.

My favorite mission was rescue, and it was intense! The squad's goal was to silently take out patrols in the middle of town, find the VIP, and escort him to safety. After we grabbed our target, an ear-piercing alarm rang out, and the whole town erupted in gunfire! Rubber bullets whizzed by my head, some ricocheted off of walls, and a few hit me in the arm. "Damn that stings!" I thought, "but at least they aren't real." We zigzagged through buildings, eliminating terrorists both inside and out using realistic cover techniques. When we finally got the VIP to safety, my heart was pounding harder than it ever has before.

After the group had chow in the mess tent, it was time to check out *SOCOM US Navy Seals Tactical Strike*. Imagine my delight to find out that the latest iteration of the popular series focuses more on strategy than action. Similar to *Full Spectrum Warrior*, players control a squad of soldiers who can be broken up into two teams. Rather than actually firing weapons and running around, cyber-commanders order their team to do everything from calling in air strikes to providing cover fire to performing stealth kills. It only takes a few minutes to get used to the controls, and after that, they feel very intuitive.

Real-life Navy Seals always go into battle with the upper-hand, and this game is no different. In addition to high-tech weaponry and gadgets, the player also usually has the element of surprise. This lets him or her adjust to each situation before the battle begins by setting up cross-fires and flanking the enemy. I also appreciate the ability to split up each team into individual soldiers because it allows nearly limitless possibilities, and with online multiplayer game play for up to four leader as well as the ability to play as Special Forces groups from around the world, the action is anything but pocket-sized.



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Publisher: Sony
Developer: Insomniac
Release Date: 10/23/2007

Genre(s): Action Platformer
Category: Super-Furry-Mechanical
of Players: 1







While visiting Insomniac Studios to demo *Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction*, four very different levels were on display. Metropolis is an impressive, bustling hub of technology filled with skyscrapers, hover vehicles, and, of course, grind rails. In addition, bounce pads are scattered throughout the level that throw Ratchet and his metallic comrade high into the air, and futuristic enemies are around every corner. While it is mostly viewed from a behind-the-back perspective, some parts of it are played as a 2D side-scroller, reminiscent of the old-school days of gaming.

Next is Sargasso, which is set in a lush background of greenery with swamps, rivers, and various prehistoric creatures. Some dinosaurs are almost too large to fill the screen, and one is so gigantic that Ratchet can climb up its back like a set of stairs. Sure T-Rexes may a bit intimidating, but that just makes their reaction to the Groovetron all the more hilarious! This floating disco ball forces all enemies in a small radius to break into spontaneous bouts of dancing, so imagine a ten-ton dino doing The Hustle, and you can't help but laugh out loud.

Iris is an ice level filled with skull-faced pirates that want nothing less than to skewer the dynamic duo. However, Ratchet can slip into a funny-looking pirate suit that sports a peg leg and hooked hand so he can limp around without drawing attention. Navigating some parts of Iris requires walking sideways on special paths while other obstructions involve cutting through ice barriers with the Geo-Laser.

Last on the list is Space Combat, which is set in...well...space. Players must fly a nimble spaceship through a gorgeous recreation of the universe while blasting enemy ships and avoiding projectiles. This level is extremely varied, forcing the player to avoid gigantic Capital Ships, fly around a planet, dive down into its ravine, soar through a black hole, and finally battle a menacing metallic end boss.

While not flying in space, players have a virtual cornucopia of exotic weaponry at their fingertips. For example, the Tornado Launcher fires a cyclone that is controlled with the SIXAXIS controller, and Death Springs emits a roomful of Slinkies that explode on enemies. Most weapons can be upgraded by selecting different attributes from a pre-made 'upgrade tree,' and the effects range from additional ammunition to increased range or power. This type of customization is a very welcome addition.

Unfortunately, *Ratchet and Clank Future: Tools of Destruction* doesn't support multiplayer, but there seems to be more than enough action to satisfy fans of the series.

HALO 3



Weapon upgrades.



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XBOX 360 LIVE



Preview by Wanderer

Publisher: Eidos
Developer: Funcom
Release Date: 2008

Genre(s): MMORPG
Category: Crom, Count the Dead
of Players: Many

AGE OF CONAN
HYBORIAN ADVENTURES



Conan is a hot property once again, with a successful comic from Dark Horse, a movie in development, and an action game on the way from THQ. Now there's also *Age of Conan*, by the same development studio that brought you *Anarchy Online*. Set at the end of the original stories' timeline, with Conan as the king of Aquilonia, it allows you to play your own barbarian in the Hyborian Age.

As you might expect, the result is a dark and bloody MMO where guys wearing not a whole hell of a lot carve each other up. You begin the game washed up on a beach, and from the word "go," you're fighting for your life. You control everything in real-time, using sword combos and summoned pets to fight on your behalf.

At fifth level, you choose one of four archetypes for your character (soldier, priest, rogue, or mage), then choose other classes as you level up. *Age of Conan* will ship with a level cap of 80.

The odd thing about *Age of Conan*, though, is that in a day and age when most new MMOs are trying *not* to be fantasy-based, it's going in the other direction entirely. It's a complete throwback to the roots of the fantasy genre: thews ripple, princesses need saving, and the PVP is in the form of drunken tavern brawls. That and the *Conan* license may give it an odd sort of counterintuitive edge in the increasingly crowded MMO marketplace.









the agency



Preview by Wanderer

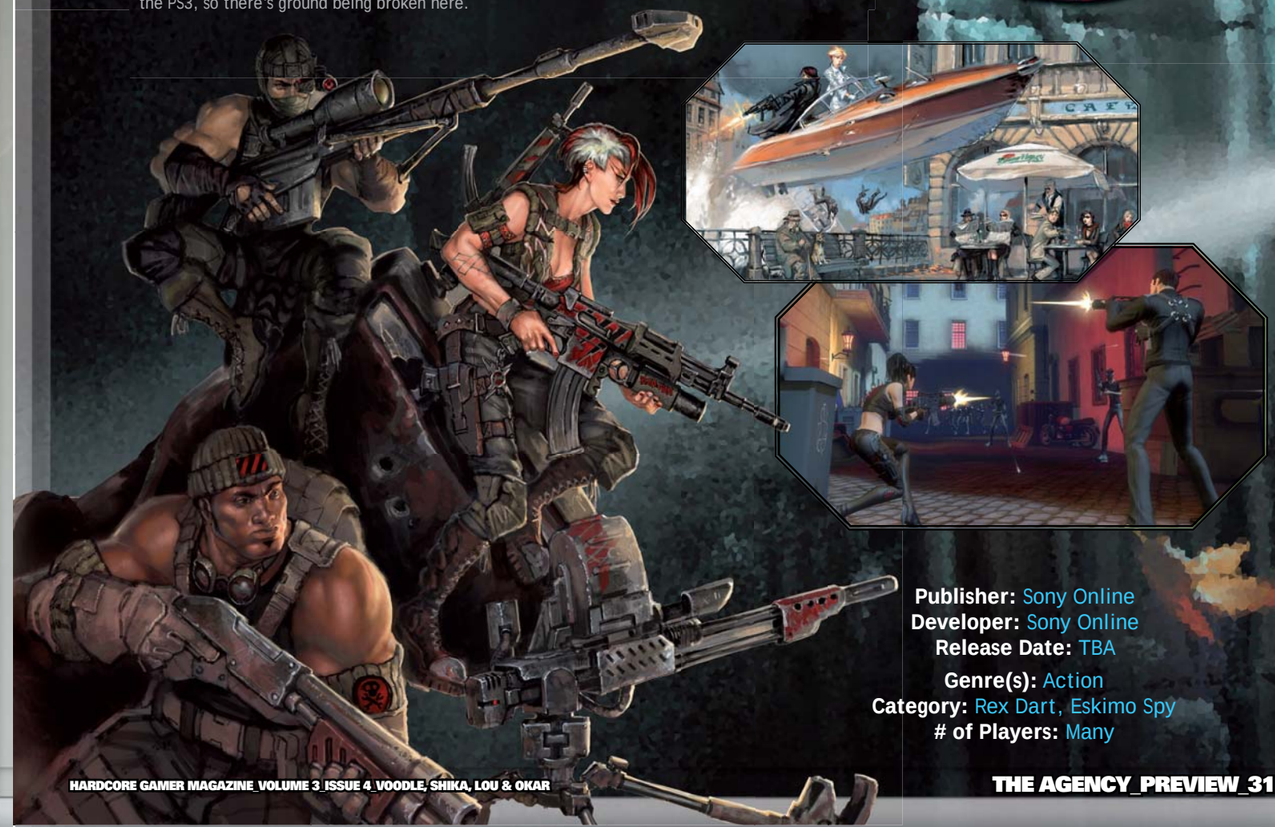


***The Agency* barely existed when it was shown at E3; it was mostly shown as a .wmv file of gameplay, looping on a computer in the corner of Sony Online's hotel suite. As such, it's mostly a collection of concept art and ideas right now, but the latter are at least interesting.**

The Agency is a massively multiplayer online first-person shooter, with all the gadgets, fast cars, ridiculous stunts, and skimpily dressed women you'd expect out of a James Bond movie. When enemy agents show up, you drop behind the barrel of your gun and take them on with your friends in a sort of FPS co-op mode.

You can play the game as a spy, using stealth and gadgetry to infiltrate and execute your missions, or a comedically heavily-armed mercenary. If you start with one approach and wind up wanting to try the other, all you have to do is change your outfit and you'll change your role.

The rest of the game is still up in the air, but Sony Online is mentioning the ability to collect backup NPCs to take care of goods, services, and in-game mail for you, as well as players forming their own Agencies to expand their web of influence. Of course, this is the point in a game's development where everything could change on a moment's notice, so this is one we'll have to keep an eye on. If nothing else, it's slated to be one of the first MMOs of any kind for the PS3, so there's ground being broken here.



Publisher: Sony Online
Developer: Sony Online
Release Date: TBA

Genre(s): Action
Category: Rex Dart, Eskimo Spy
of Players: Many



Classic Gaming Expo 2K7 10th Anniversary

by Michael Thomasson of Good Deal Games

The Classic Gaming Expo, affectionately dubbed CGE, is one of the premiere retro-gaming gathering events, drawing crowds long before similar events like Philly Classic, CCAG, and CinciClassic (to name a few) got their start. While the event has changed over time in content and venue, this year, after a short hiatus, it has returned in all its glory to "Sin City," better known as Las Vegas.

Similar shows attract those that fondly remember simpler games from simpler times. CGE goes beyond simple nostalgia and is also known as ***the*** collector's convention. CGE regularly reveals new games for classic systems.

Many of these titles, referred to as "homebrews," are simply amazing! Not only do they support vintage consoles several decades old, the games often push the technology far beyond what the original hardware creators and software programmers ever imagined. For example, ***Mighty Mighty Missile*** for the Sega CD has more moving sprite graphics on the screen at the same time than any other officially released title for that system. More impressive, many of these games are often crafted by a single individual without access to original documentation and design tools.

Along with newly created content, long-rumored lost prototypes always seem to emerge at the Classic Gaming Expo. This year was no exception as ***Pitcher's Duel***, a Vectrex game that was stalled in development almost a quarter century ago, finally reached the hands of eager hobbyists. So whether you are looking to simply stroll down memory lane or find something new for an old and cherished system, you're in good company at the Classic Gaming Expo.

PHOTO CREDITS
Ken Jong
Lance Cortez of Retroware TV
Michael Thomasson of Good Deal Games





Speaking of good company, you are sure to meet a friend or two at the show. While bright pixels and booming blips and beeps often steal the spotlight, do not misunderstand; this show is as much about the gathering of players and game designers as the games themselves. Walking the show floor are many celebrities. While you won't expect to find Tom Cruise wandering about, you will find the likes of David Crane, programmer of Atari's ***Pitfall***; Steve Woita, a VCS and NES designer; or a handful of Intellivision's Blue Sky Rangers, to name a few. All of them could be seen mingling with adoring fans and attendees throughout the conference.

A chosen few classic gaming celebrities held keynote speeches that were quite enlightening. One such speech featured Jay Smith, creator of the GCE Vextrex and Microvision. During this presentation, attendees learned how no one at GCE thought that anyone would ever become a good enough player to clear the thirteen programmed levels in ***MineStorm***. Jay stated that within weeks of release, GCE was receiving letters about the "Dust Levels" that appear following the completion of the 13th board. Jay stated, "These levels were never programmed or planned and just happened as a complete accident. What happens is that the mines are reduced to tiny specks, but the game is still playable and operates."





Jay Smith told many yarns, such as how the original Microvision was intentionally made bigger by marketing and that it could have been half its physical size. He spoke about technical issues such as solving the complex problem of writing text on a vector screen, designing the first 16x16 LCD screen "that couldn't be done," and how the famous Vectrex "hum" was not in any of the prototype models and is thought to be a manufacturing issue caused by faulty or improper grounding. He teased the crowd with the news that the Vectrex was almost re-released as a portable in 1990 using a CRT with an Oscilloscope for static deflection.







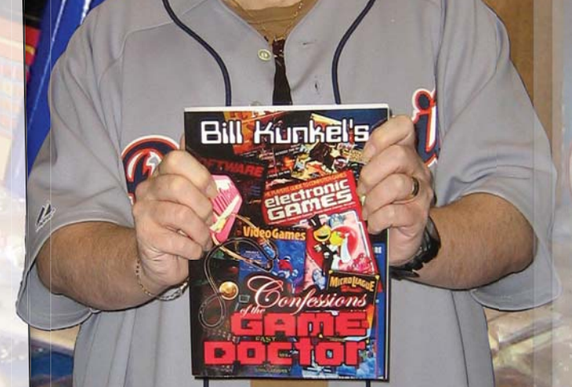
Intellivision fans were pleased to hear from Keith Robinson and members of the Blue Sky Rangers. During a question and answer segment, when asked about dealings with people who are still in the industry, Keith Robinson looked directly at cameraman Earl Green and sighed, "Man, I wish the cameras weren't rolling..." — much to the crowd's delight!

Al Alcorn, Atari's first employee and the programmer of ***Pong***, gave a Powerpoint presentation that he previously had shown to students at Stanford, dealing with factors in society that led to how Atari operated and the company's mindset, noting how Atari "bet the company every year!"

He mentioned how Nolan Bushnell, Atari's founder and president at the time, promised employee Steve Jobs a "$1000 bonus for every chip removed from ***Breakout,***" and how Jobs used Wozniak to do the work, then took the credit and the majority of the cash!

Alcorn stated that when Warner first bought Atari they considered changing the Atari logo. It wasn't until the polling results revealed that the Atari logo was more recognizable than that of both Mickey Mouse and Coca Cola to the target demographic of young teens when Warner decided it was better to keep what they had!

He spoke of his involvement with Atari in creating the first embossed hologram, which evolved into the portable Cosmos system. Alcorn stated that when the suits at Atari eventually admitted to him that the Cosmos would never be released, he abandoned Atari.

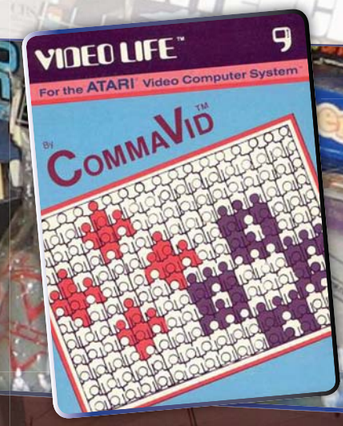


And there were more keynotes: the Activision programmers comprised of Garry Kitchen, David Crane, Steve Cartwright, and Glyn Anderson spoke about leaving Atari to form their own company. An Atari Panel consisting of Steve Woita, Keithen Hayenga, Steve Wright and Bob Polaro told stories of their days programming games for the VCS. Game journalism was discussed by the first gaming journalist Bill Kunkel, along with Chris Koehler and Chris Bieniak. CGE founders Joe Santulli, John Hardie, and Sean Kelly even reminisced over hijinks from past expos.

CGE itself is also host to other events. There is always an Alumni Dinner, an event party hosted by CGE Services, honoring those involved in making some of our beloved classic games, and this year the Pinball Hall of Fame also opened its doors to attendees of CGE. Complimentary shuttles ferried players from the show floor to the pinball museum, which featured over 140 classic pinball machines as well as 40 classic arcade coin-ops. The Pinball Hall of Fame also hosted the latest Retrotopia, sponsored by Keith Robinson of Intellivision fame. All of the pinball machines and arcade coin-ops were on free play, a disk jockey was on hand spinning music of the '80s, and all had a good time. Several INTV veterans could be found tilting machines, including John Sohl, designer of ***Astrosmash***, and ***B-17 Bomber***. While we were not all "pinball wizards" to begin with, the more signature drinks (referred to as the ***Astrosmash***) we consumed, the less control attendees had over the ol' silver ball!

With this year's proceeds going to The Salvation Army, the CGE auction is not to be missed. Watching John Hardie carefully twist words to get bidders salivating for rare collectable items, such as a full-size Solid Snake statue that sold for $450, was very entertaining. Highlights included the sale of an Intellivision Keyboard Component w/ ECS computer module along with one of the two known existing copies of ***Conversational French,*** which sold for a cool $3,000.

Four "Mystery Boxes" with minimal or exceptional contents were also auctioned off throughout the evening for various values. One such "Mystery Box" sold for $1,300 and to the winner's delight it contained the rarest of Atari 2600 games, CommaVid's ***Video Life***. Less than twenty copies were known to be made, and in the past it has fetched values approaching three grand!

















Another draw of the show, and worth the price of admission alone, is the CGE Museum, a gathering of rare and one-of-a-kind items all converging in one spot forming a nearly impossible reunion. Hundreds of items, most of which have never been seen by most attendees "in the wild," create a parade of plastic and wiring, components and integrated circuits, buttons and switches: rare cartridges, devices, peripherals, consoles, adapters, and other miscellaneous hardware and software from the golden days of electronic console gaming. There are objects which represent just about every niche of gaming history that, despite being quite old, appear new to even to the most experienced retro-gaming enthusiast. Many times I witnessed the awe of discovery even for items decades old. Attendees sighed at the sight of Ralph Baer's brown box or a Jager rifle modified by the US military for marksmanship training on a Super Nintendo, to name just a few.

Also for attendees' enjoyment, video game inspired tunes were played by 8-Bit Weapon, supported by ComputeHer and Mel-Bot. Dozens of coin-op and console games could be played for free, and fans were invited to trade with each other in the swap meet room.

Towards the close of the show, bargains were to be found while vendors slashed prices to avoid having to pack and transport leftover inventory. CGE Services, in the fashion of their '***Dig Dug Drop***' of years past, tossed dozens of games on the floor announcing a "Fifty Cent FRENZY" as attendees tried to scoop up games at a bargain price!

In conclusion, if you've made the show in the past, the organizers and exhibitors thank you. If not, all those that attend cordially invite you to check out the next event. The Classic Gaming Expo is a good time to be had by all, and you certainly fit into that category.

VENDORS

Arcade-in-a-Box showcased their classic gaming system on a massive 70-inch projection screen and demonstrated their upcoming Jamma-in-a-Box system.

Atari2600.com released three new games: ***Rent Wars*** and ***Nerds*** for the Atari 2600, and ***The Last Ninja*** for the Atari 5200.

CGE Services released ***Lasercade*** for the Atari 2600 and the long-lost and long rumored ***Pitcher's Duel*** for the GCE Vectrex.



Custom Portables, known for taking systems of yesterday and making them portable today, did just that with demos for systems such as the Sega Dreamcast, Atari Jaguar, Nintendo NES, GameCube and N64, X-Box, and even the fan favorite coin-op Neo-Geo!

Digital Press, operated by CGE co-founder Joe Santulli, had a large assortment of classic games for sale, as well as the popular and informative DP Collector's Guides.

Gamegator2000 sold software for the Philips CD-I and a unique adapter that allows one to use a Sega Genesis controller in place of an impossible-to-find CD-I controller.

Good Deal Games supported homebrew publishing in a grand way, with over two dozen new and recently released games for the Atari Lynx, Atari Jaguar, Colecovision, Sega CD, Turbografx-16, Vectrex, and more. They auctioned two unreleased Capcom prototypes for the Sega Saturn, ***Werewolf*** and ***Major Damage***. Copies of their ReVival Magazine along with the new ***Gyruss***-based military science fiction novel, ***From Neptune to Earth***, were also available for the literary crowd.

Intellivision Productions released the repackaged PC/Mac software bundle ***Las Vegas Lounge Trio***, ***Intellivision Lives!***, and ***Intellivision Rocks!***, along with the audio cd ***Intellivision in Hi-Fi***. Those in the know who asked nicely could demo an upcoming version of Intellivision software for the Nintendo DS, featuring touch screen controls that made the original Intellivision overlays a snap — the best emulation of the Intellivision to date!

Messiah Entertainment demonstrated their Generation NEX console that is fully compatible with Nintendo NES games, making blowing into aging carts a thing of the past! Their new 2.4GHz wireless arcade stick was also on-hand and worked nicely.

NWCGE, known as the Northwest Classic Games Enthusiasts, displayed an assortment of unique items. Among them were reproduction carts for the Atari 2600 and other systems. Titles previously available on diskette for the Atari 400/800 computers, such as ***Claim Jumper***, ***Attack of the Mutant Camels***, and ***Jumpman Junior***, were ported to the Atari 5200 in cartridge format.

Packrat Videogames featured playable homebrews and hacks at their booth. Showing amazing support for the Odyssey2 console, they highlighted new titles such as ***Kill the Attacking Aliens***, ***Mr. Roboto***, ***Planet Lander***, ***Pong***, ***Puzzle Piece***, and more.



Pink Godzilla had people playing in analog with their ***Pink Godzilla Dev Kit***, a new full-color card game about creating videogames.

RetroGaming Radio conducted interviews and offered DVD-rom collections of their weekly seven-year-and-counting radio show.

RetroZone released Sialagogic's ***Sudoku 2007*** for the NES, as well as USB converters that allow playing emulated games on a PC or Nintendo Wii with original controllers.

Rolenta Press sold copies of their excellent game books and previewed the upcoming 4th edition of the must-own ***Phoenix: The Fall & Rise of Videogames***. Famed author Leonard Herman and premiere videogame journalist Bill Kunkel autographed their books in the Good Deal Games booth.

Twin Galaxies made available the newest edition of their popular ***Twin Galaxies Official Video Game & Pinball Book of World Records: Arcade Volume***. Walter Day promoted the upcoming theatrical film, ***The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters***, about the battle between a middle school science teacher and a hot sauce mogul for the Guinness world record on the arcade classic ***Donkey Kong***.

Also at CGE2K7 were Billy Galaxy, Next Level Videogames, Older Games, Y-Bot Classic Games, and Yobo Gameware selling various wares and game-related toys and merchandise.



FanTranning 101

by **Scott Jacobi** of *Retrogaming Times Monthly*

I have always admired fan translations of video games. The notion that a collection of "ordinary Joes" could pick up a title that was discarded by a big company and make a new play experience available to even more people has always been intriguing to me. However, I had just enough knowledge as a programmer to believe that such a task was beyond my ability, and never mind my complete inability to comprehend Japanese. I never suspected that I would be responsible for such a translation.



As a video game history buff, I found myself researching a game made by Namco, known as *The Tower of Druaga*. It was an arcade game that was as popular in Japan as it was unpopular in America. In the process of finding out what platforms it was released on, I found out about a particular conversion for the PC Engine. I had assumed that it was simply a very accurate port of the arcade version, which Namco was known for. Nevertheless, I gave it a shot, and it turned out to be quite different. It was more of an upgraded version with an isometric view than a straight port, so I figured I'd give it a shot.

One of the aspects that made *The Tower of Druaga* so notorious was the challenge of making the necessary treasure chests appear. The solutions were different for each floor, and appeared incredibly random. This PC Engine version was kind enough to at least provide players with clues on how to attain the chests, but unfortunately for me, they were all in Japanese. I thought my story with this game would end here.

In an unusual act of curiosity, I decided to take a look at the game's ROM in a hex editor, just to see what I could see. A hex editor allows you to examine raw machine language, which is composed of a series of base-sixteen numbers. The contents of a ROM can be generally categorized into two parts: program and data. It's not easy to find things in either part, but between the two, data is far easier to search through. I happened to chance upon the word "NAMCO" among all of the numbers.

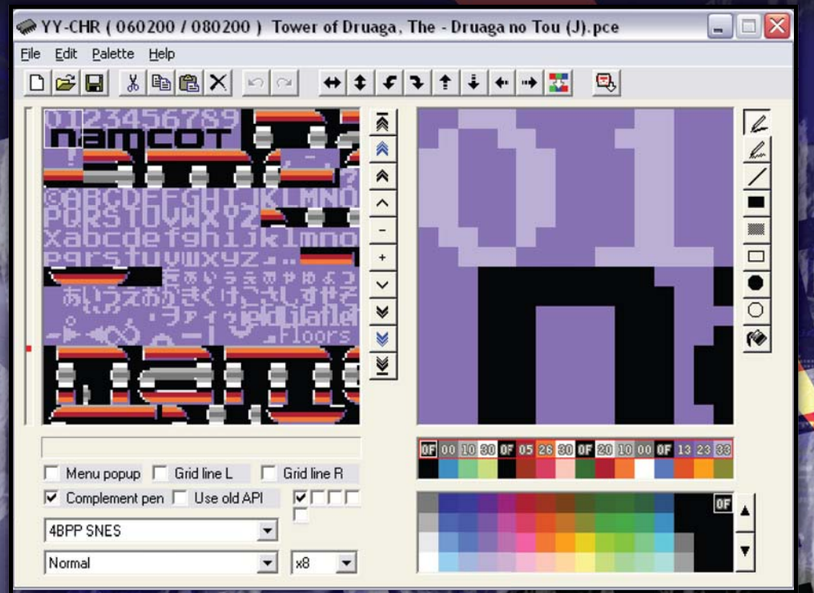
Further investigation led me to believe that I had found the data belonging to the title screen. As a quick test, I replaced the name NAMCO with my name, and started the game up in an emulator. Sure enough, the emulator displayed the title screen with the name SCOTT where the name NAMCO used to be.

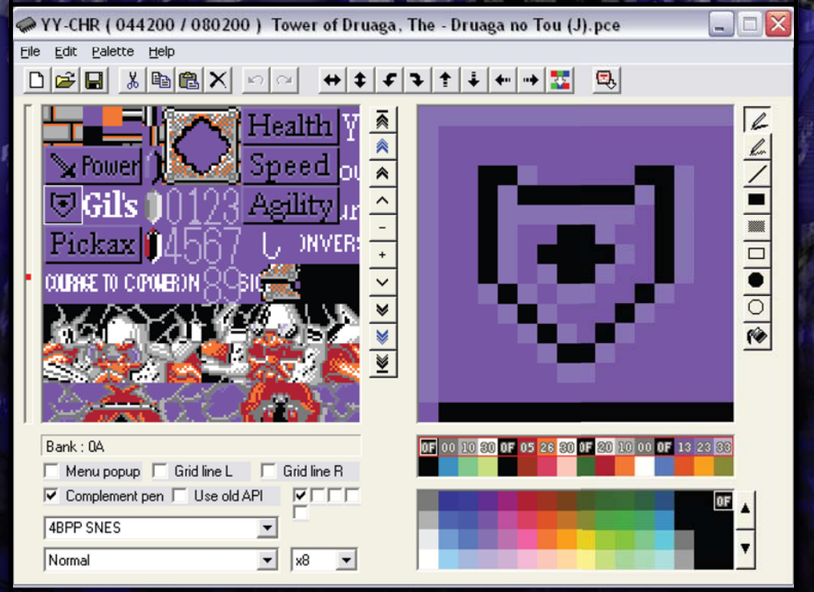
Emboldened by this discovery, I decided to investigate a little further. Every letter of every word in the game was composed of a series of numbers from zero to 255. By testing every value out on the title screen, I was able to create a table that mapped every number to the symbol they represent in the ROM. Even though I didn't know how to read the Japanese that appeared in the first hint, I was able to convert those symbols into numbers, and find the place in the ROM where that hint was located. That's when it first occurred to me: I might be able to translate this game into English.

There are two difficult parts to translating a ROM. One is the technical know-how to replace the Japanese text with English text. The other is knowing what English text to replace the Japanese text with. I had figured out the first part, but I definitely needed assistance with the second part. I had two choices: attempt to translate each hint with the assistance of an online translation website









This dilemma is something that many ROM translators, both professionals and amateurs, have come across. It is a common complaint among hardcore fans of any video game series, that a game is poorly translated when it's brought over from Japan. The very problem that I was experiencing is one of the biggest reasons for that complaint. It's rare to find extra space in a ROM to actually enhance a translation. Far more often, translators find that they have to compromise on the accuracy of the translation in order to make it fit into the memory allotted for a game's text.

I completed the task of fitting all of the translations into the game, and I honestly believed that I had done all that I could to make the game playable by English-speaking gamers. There was one particularly glaring omission from the translation, and that was the status screen. The status screen was drawn on the screen using graphics tiles instead of text. Graphics are stored very differently from text, and I could not find the location of those tiles with my own ability.

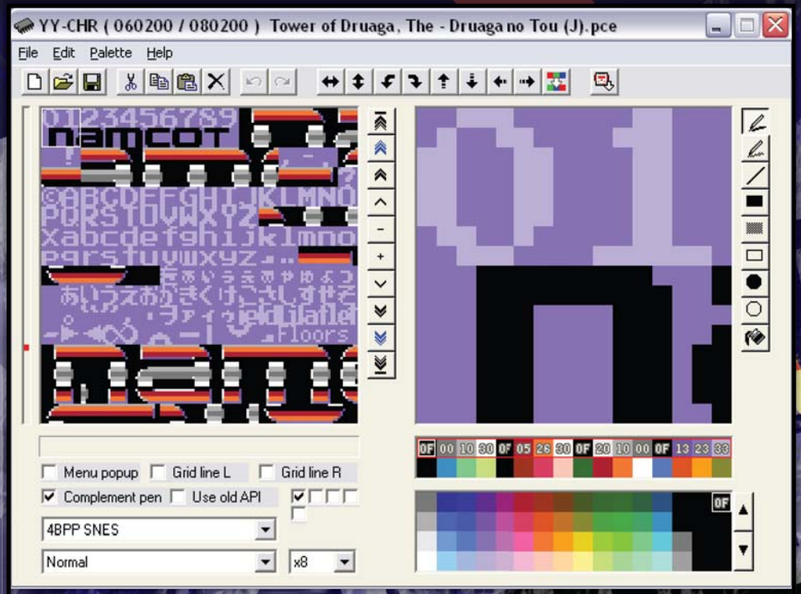
I felt that the game was 95% translated, and if it was ever going to be 100%, perhaps someone could pick up where I left off and complete the game.

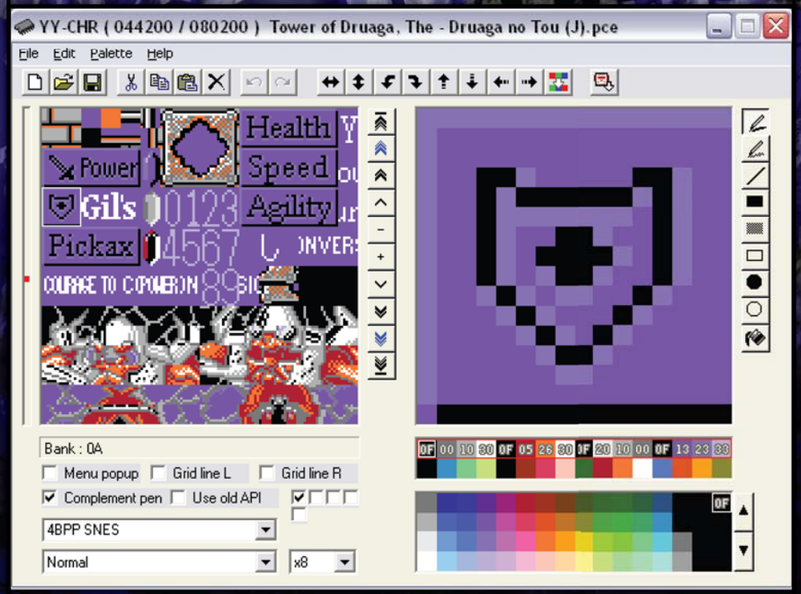
I proceeded to make the patch that other users could apply to their Japanese version of the ROM and use my translation, and I submitted the patch to http://www.romhacking.net/ which houses the largest collection of ROM translations on the net. They accepted my patch and the translation was posted. I believed that was the end of my story.

I never would have had the notion to attempt a project such as this if it hadn't been for the Internet, so it's not so ironic that that I was also empowered to finish the project because of the Internet as well. The site manager who accepted by patch suggested that I ask for help with the status screen on the translation forums. Figuring that it couldn't hurt, I explained my dilemma and asked if anyone knew how to find the graphics tiles where the untranslated Japanese was stored. Sure enough, only two days later, a forum member who goes by Sliver X posted a screenshot of the tiles, as they appeared in the ROM, using a special tool known only as YY-CHR.









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"It is a **common complaint** among hardcore fans of any video game series, that a game is **poorly translated** when it's brought over from **Japan.**"



YY-CHR was developed by a Japanese programmer to help him change the graphic tiles of different video games to whatever he wanted them to be. The tool could load the contents of a ROM into memory, and allow a user to view them. The trick, however, was to look at the contents in the correct format. Every system has a different native format, so you had to choose that format in order to see anything, or it will simply look like garbage. Sliver X had found the correct format for the PC Engine (which turned out to be identical to the SNES format) and found the location (or memory address) where the tiles were stored. Now I could actually get to work completing the translation.

Having discussed the status screen with Keiko, I knew what each tile should become. Since YY-CHR was designed to be an editor, I was able to go to the same location that Sliver X found, and immediately begin to re-draw the tiles in English. In some cases, I opted to use symbols, since the status screen used Kanji. So I took the Kanji for "sword" and replaced it with a sword icon. In other cases, I replaced the Kanji with a very condensed English word (like "power"). When I was done editing, I saved my work, and loaded the game up an emulator to see how it looked. At last, I thought, the game is finally translated. Before I stopped, I decided to poke around a little more in the ROM.

I happened to stumble upon the glyph set, that is, the set of tiles used for the English and Japanese characters. It contained a huge number of Japanese letters (none of which I was using anymore) and the standard twenty-six capital English letters. At this point, I decided that the translation might look better if I added a lower case to the glyph set. I replaced many of the unused Japanese letter with my own designs, and proceeded to rewrite many of my translations, this time with lower case letters. This time-consuming, but simple act resulted in a more polished translation that was easier to read.

Having gone this far, there was only one more thing that was bothering me: abbreviations. On the equipment screen, I only had enough room for twelve letters per item. In most cases, that was enough, but for items with names like "White Gauntlet," I could not fit the entire name on the screen, so I settled for "White Gaunt." which was twelve characters exactly. I borrowed an idea from the many great ROM translators that came before me. I created extra tiles that were designed to contain two lower case letters. For example, I created one tile that represented "tl" and another tile that represented "et." Now I could remove the abbreviations and fit the entire name of the item on the screen by writing "White Gaun(tl)(et)" for example.

After doing this, I finally got the translation exactly where I wanted, and I happily submitted the updated patch to RomHacking.net so it could be enjoyed by everyone. I'm not sure if I would ever attempt another translation again in the future, but I certainly wouldn't rule it out. In the end, I realized that the process isn't quite as mystifying as I believed it was. Certainly, I chose an easy game to work on, and there are even easier ones out there. Some games that are already translated (such as *Final Fantasy IV* and *Phantasy Star II*) are translated again by fans because they wanted to provide players with a more accurate translation than the official one which was given to them. If you ever happen to stumble upon a game that you are motivated to translate, never assume that ability is beyond your reach. Even if you simply post a message on the translation message boards, you may just find someone who can help you get over the bigger hurdles, and provide fellow hardcore gamers with a brand new gaming experience.

Scott Jacobi is a 6 year video game industry vet. He is the Chief Editor for Retrogaming Times Monthly, the longest-running online free Retrogaming newsletter ever, and he is a member of the staff at StrategyWiki.org.

PEANUT BUTTER AND CHOCOLATE

Hitman: Blood Money was definitely one of the best games to hit the Xbox 360 last year. It mixed style with action and foreshadowed just what the Xbox 360 is capable of through its sprawling stages and interesting AI. As a player, you had an enormous number of choices as to how to proceed. If you wanted to kill every single person in a level... well, who could stop you?

Another sleeper hit was *Freedom Fighters*. It was based on the *Hitman 2* engine, though it was geared more toward team-based gameplay. Instead of sneaking about and killing in silence, you and your crew took to the streets to retake the country. Simple but effective controls made the game a hit with casual and hardcore gamers alike.

What's this got to do with *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men*? Well, that's easy.

You got *Hitman* in my *Freedom Fighters*!
You got *Freedom Fighters* in my *Hitman*!

KANE & LYNCH DEAD MEN™

story by 4thletter

ALONE WITH A BUDDY

IO Interactive is behind both *Hitman* and *Freedom Fighters*, and *Kane & Lynch* is what you get when you put two great tastes together. The style and stealth of *Hitman* mix with the team tactics of *Freedom Fighters* to give up a unique gameplay experience.

Cooperative play is one of the biggest selling points of multiplayer titles right now, so it's no surprise that more and more games are starting to implement it. However, *Kane & Lynch* is slightly different. It's a single player cooperative experience.

You are Kane. Kane was sentenced to death row after turning his life from gold to dross. His son found his father's gun, shot himself by accident, and died two weeks later. Kane left the country and went into the soldier for hire business in an attempt to forget his old life. He worked for a secret organization called The Seven for over a decade, until the traditional "one last hit" went south. He escaped with a fortune, but his team didn't even manage to escape with their lives.



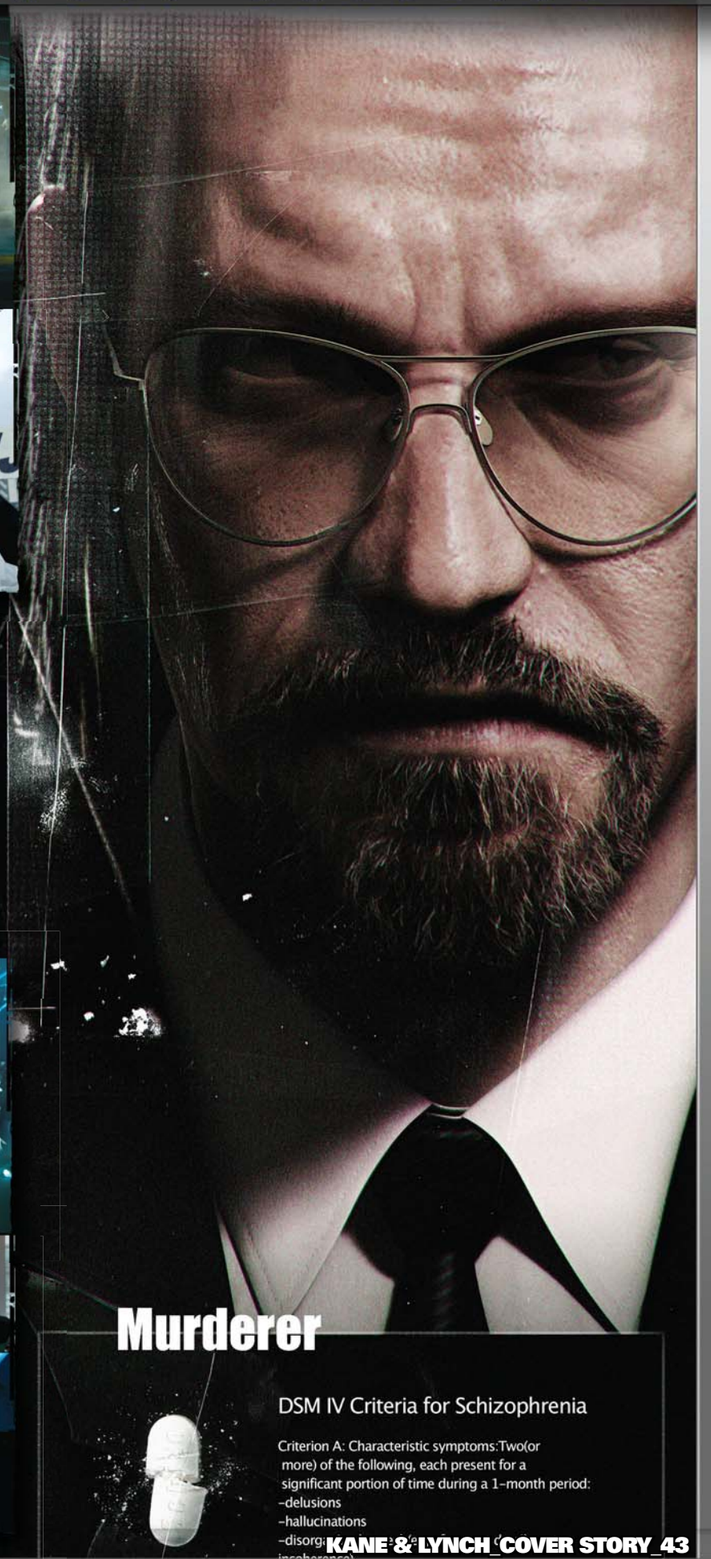
Lynch, your partner, was also sentenced to death. He's accused of murdering his wife, though he isn't sure if he's guilty or not. You see, he blacks out sometimes. When he wakes up, he tends to find himself covered in blood and possibly responsible for some very shocking acts.

They meet on death row, mere moments before what appears to be a jail break. In reality, four members of The Seven survived the job and want to fix things. In short, either Kane gives them their due, meaning his fortune and his life, or they kill his wife and daughter.

It's an easy choice. Kane is already responsible for the death of one of his children. He can't handle being responsible for another death.







HARDCORE GAMER MAGAZINE_VOLUME 3_ISSUE 4_VOODLE, SHIKA, LOU & OKAR

GETTING TOO OLD FOR THIS

You could call *Kane & Lynch* a buddy movie and you wouldn't be too far off. If you were to take cult classics like *48 Hrs* or *Bandits*, where the two "buddies" pretty much hate each other, you'll be even closer. Kane and Lynch get along out of necessity, but they don't quite trust each other yet.

Lynch is, to put it bluntly, unhinged. He's quick to anger, even more prone to violence, and severely under-medicated. Sometimes he talks to things that aren't there, as well. If you bring Lynch along on a job, you're almost guaranteed to fall into some heinous mayhem, not to mention his penchant for leaving every single person around him dead.

Kane, on the other hand, is a bit more subtle. He's built up a few connections over his time with the mercenaries and he's rock solid at planning heists. He knows how to get in and out, but if he doesn't rein Lynch in, he's looking at failing his family for a final time. His cool head under fire won't mean much if Lynch is doing enough blazing for the both of them.

LOOSE CANNONS

"What's all this got to do with gameplay?"

That's a fair question and the answer is easy. It has *everything* to do with gameplay.

Since you're controlling Kane, Lynch is run by the AI. He will go off and do his own thing, either for story reasons or just because, and this means that you have to adjust. You can direct him, to an extent, but he is his own man. The anti-buddy movie feel of the game is reflected in the gameplay itself.

We got a bit of face time with the game, and were shown a couple of stages. Kane and Lynch need to pull off a bank heist to find something. They find a safecracker and make a plan. After meeting up with the safecracker, they gas the bank, putting almost everyone to sleep on the inside.

They breach the building and descend to the vault. Kane tells Lynch to go watch the hostages, just in case a few of them wake up. Kane, meanwhile, stays with the safecracker. Waves of guards come pouring into the vault area and Kane fights them off all by himself. They crack the vault, check the safety deposit boxes, and get ready to head back to the ground level to escape.

When they reach the bank lobby, they find Lynch standing on a platform and dead hostages scattered all around. Lynch, however, is still firing on them. "I thought I told you to stay still!" he shouts. "Don't make me kill you again!"

Kane eventually calms Lynch down, but they've lost a valuable bargaining chip. There is a gauntlet of cops waiting outside and they've got absolutely no leverage. Their only choice is to get into a shoot-out with LA's finest and engage in a high speed chase in a van down the streets. That's pretty much the definition of the term "Charlie Foxtrot."











K.I.S.S.

Kane's mercenary connections tend to pay off. He can gather a crew for large hits to make it easier to get in and out. Some jobs just need more than two people. So, yes, there is squad-based gameplay in *Kane & Lynch*

Look, don't run away screaming. It isn't that bad at all. IO Interactive made a conscious decision to get as far away from the war game genre as possible. Those kind of games tend to be overcomplicated and drown the user in multi-layered menus.

In *Kane & Lynch*, you've just got a few buttons. Everything is kept simple. The status of your crew mates are displayed as a small icon in the upper right hand corner. You can give them a few commands — Go, Attack, and Return. They will handle the rest. You don't have to worry about setting breaching charges, allies refusing to obey your orders, or anything like that. The system just works.

The crew mechanics come in when a level needs a little extra oomph. Two men against the world is pretty tough, but throw six into the mix, some of them with their own personal soldiers, and you've got World War III. The crew numbers are decided on a per-level basis and scaled to fit the action. You don't control the make-up of the team, so that means no trying to overwhelm the enemy.

There is a reason for your crew to be present where they are. They aren't faceless ciphers, like you'd find in other games. There are little touches and bits of dialogue that hint at a storied past, either alone or with either of the main characters. Lynch is the subject of no small amount of scorn and is frequently called a "wife-killer." Another member of the crew found religion in prison and isn't afraid to comment on your actions. Others, of course, aren't too happy to be there at all.

You can tell at a glance exactly what your crew is up to, making it easy to strategize. This economy carries over to the HUD, which is as minimalist as you can get without eschewing it entirely. All you really need to know is how much ammo you have left, so that's all you get to know. Health is shown through in-game actions. Kane's vision will go red, the screen goes awash in motion blur, and he'll eventually pass out. Immersive? Yes.

The good news is that passing out doesn't necessarily mean dying. Your crew can bring you back to life with a shot of adrenaline, and you can return the favor. This isn't an unlimited option, though. Too many adrenaline shots will net you a brand new heart attack and kill you dead. Use it sparingly and, though this should go without saying, don't get shot.

Even weapons sharing is simple. You can trade weapons between allies, so if a crew mate has a rifle that you like, and you've got a P90 that he may enjoy, you can access his inventory with one click (of a button) and trade weapons with one flick (of a stick). "One click and one flick" is the name of the game. If you're running low on ammo, your crew can hook you up with a few extra magazines, as well.

That's about as intrusive as the HUD gets. At any other point in time, the cinematic feel of the game is maintained. There aren't traditional loading screens or static chapter breaks. Kane and Lynch speak over the loading screens, discussing the upcoming job, arguing, and generally hating each other's guts. The chapter titles are key, or clever, lines of dialogue from the current section of the game, be it an observation on heights (who doesn't hate them?) or on the ridiculous nature of a job. You aren't just watching a buddy movie. You're playing one.

COME GET SOME

All of this attention to detail is no accident.

The game began its life focused on Kane, but Lynch kept pushing his way into the title. Where the devs wanted a super tense scene with just Kane, they'd find that this germ of an idea called Lynch could make the scene even more tense. Lynch had an edge that Kane didn't have and he did nothing but make the game more interesting.

The next trick was implementing him into the game in a reasonable manner. Cracking the co-op single player was no easy task, but once it was done, development became much easier. Having a contentious duo makes dialoguing and plotting much easier. Instead of having to fight to create the voice of one character, you can bounce the characters off of each other and see what comes out of the pot. The two characters are going to be knee-deep in bad guys, but at each other's throats as well.











INTELLIGENT

Kane & Lynch is closer to the *Freedom Fighters* side of the family tree than the *Hitman* side, but it didn't fall too far from either of its parents. IO Interactive mastered squad-based gameplay with *Freedom Fighter* and used what they learned to dig deep into *Kane & Lynch*.

Hitman was always more of a hardcore title than *Freedom Fighters*, so the tilt toward *Freedom Fighters* makes sense. *Hitman* took time and multiple playthroughs to master. It was all about figuring out every single angle and acting accordingly. The AI ran routes, but was extremely smart. You'd have to outthink, outfight, and outrun the enemy in order to get anywhere. Making a mistake spelled doom.

Kane & Lynch is different. It's an action game, one where twitch reflexes are paramount. It's a bit more brute force than its predecessor, so a different tack is required. The AI has to be smart in an alternate way. They have to be dumber to fit into the action movie feel. This doesn't mean that they are stupid, of course. You've seen movies where the crowd will dash right through a busy gunfight in a blind panic? That's *Kane & Lynch*.

The crowd mechanics have evolved quite a bit from the Mardi Gras stage in *Hitman: Blood Money*. The game can support hundreds of crowd members at one time. In nightclubs, they'll each dance to the beat in their own way. No more crowds of identical clones doing the exact same dance on the exact same loop. Each one is distinct.

If you pull a gun in a crowd scene, and someone spots you, a "ripple" of information will pass through the crowd. When that ripple reaches a guard, he's going to come over to see exactly what's going on and why you thought you could sneak a gun in.

In shoot-out situations, the crowd will panic and try to get away by any means. If you fire into, or over, a crowd, the people will dodge and duck. Clever players can use this to clear a path, but firing bullets tends to attract attention. It's a give-and-take situation. You've got a path, yeah, but now everyone knows where you are.

A LITTLE KIDNAPPING AMONGST FRIENDS

The Tokyo stages shows both the crowd mechanics and the co-op play to the fullest. You enter a nightclub and breach the office of the owner. She knows Kane, but what she doesn't know is that Kane is going to punch her in the face, knock her out, and kidnap her. Sucks to be her, right?

No, sucks to be Kane. She isn't getting out of the nightclub on her own, so Lynch has to carry her. This means that Kane has to escort him out of a club filled with a few hundred people. He's got guns, sure, but he is a man down. If you've seen Michael Mann's *Collateral*, you may be able to figure out where this is going.

Kane exits the office and pretty much directly into a firefight. The crowd scatters when the first gun fires, but as happens so often in these situations, the panic results in tragedy. Not everyone is running toward an exit. Some run for cover, others just run. Firing a gun makes them run away, but that just makes it easier for the guards to find and kill your heroes. Kane's got to balance clearing a path for his ersatz buddy with killing enemies. During all of this, the crowd is going to dart in and out of Kane's iron sights. Sure, you could be a jerk and kill them, but Kane's supposed to be the good guy here… or, if not the good guy, at least the *better* guy.

It gets better. Later, Kane and his team rappel down the side of a Tokyo highrise. One bomb and a short firefight later, and you've got an office full of dead executives and guards. Now the trick is to get down to ground level, change into their disguises, and walk out the front door. It all goes well until Lynch decides that a cop is looking at him wrong and hits him with a face full of lead. After that, it's *Assault on Precinct 13*, Tokyo high rise-style.

This time, the crowd is different. They're all going for the exit, but they aren't so worried about dodging bullets. They'll dash into your crossfire and die screaming. They crank the tense atmosphere up to eleven and turn an already tough battle into a nightmare. If you decide that the thing you just saw out of the corner of your eyes was a a panicky civilian, rather than a cop that's packing a shotgun, you're dead meat.





YOU CALL THAT SNEAKY?

As if you couldn't tell, *Kane & Lynch* isn't the subtlest game around. Its pace is another trait it inherited more from *Freedom Fighters* than *Hitman*. In fact, the speed has been increased since *Freedom Fighters*. Crowds will flood a room and impede your progress, and enemies won't hesitate to duck, cover, and flank you in a manner that's much closer to real life.

Kane and Lynch's job requires a modicum of stealth, but like all good action films, whatever can go wrong, does. Sometimes, it's Lynch's fault. Other times, things just go wrong. That's no excuse to lose your cool, of course. In the aforementioned bank scene, breaching the bank isn't just a matter of gassing the civilians and climbing in a window. You have to gain access to the bank's roof, which means making it past a few guards. If Kane can approach one of them silently, he can use the tiny knife affixed to his ring to bleed him out quietly. It's quick to pull and extremely effective.

All of your weapons are shown on your person, within reason. Kane, and other members of the group, sometimes carries a knapsack that holds guns, ammo, and grenades. While he can get away with walking around with a bag full of guns, acting suspicious is a surefire way to screw up a mission. Pulling a pistol too early can send the crowd screaming off toward the guards, who will in turn send a hail of bullets screaming your way.

In short, stealth isn't a big deal, but breaking stealth too early in a stage means that you're going to either face a fully blown mission failure or turn a cakewalk into something rotten.

your squad leader how it's done, now's your chance to graduate from armchair quarterback to starter. Each player can instruct their minions exactly as they would if the group were complete.

Splitting up your group can give you a distinct tactical advantage, though a disadvantage is equally possible. If Lynch can't make it through an area on his own, having an extra gun along for the ride can make the difference. At the same time, if you're going into a heavy firefight, being down an operative can mean the difference between death and life.

TWO EYES

Kane & Lynch is unfinished, obviously, but is far enough along in its development cycle to be able to make a few informed judgments. The graphics are not the greatest you'll see on your next-gen system, but you'll find out the reason for that soon enough.

The less detailed the enemies, the more you can have on screen at once. This isn't to say that the game looks bad, as exactly the opposite is true, but it's a conscious choice, rather than a hardware limitation. The game can support up to 900 distinct crowd members, a humanoid AI in Lynch, squad AI in your crew, tactical **and** squad AI in your enemies, and tons of explosions, so it's obvious that there is going to be some give and take.

Thankfully, the give outweighs the take. The first time you look out over the edge of a Tokyo highrise and feel a spot of vertigo or notice that you can clearly see buildings that are thousands of feet away, you'll understand. *Kane & Lynch* is all about the up close and personal, but doesn't hesitate to use a long shot to set the scene and work your emotions.



TWO HEADS ARE BETTER

With all this talk of single player co-op, one might think that multiplayer is out of the question. Untrue.

The split-screen cooperative gameplay follows the single player game. Playing co-op is easy. All you need to do is select co-op before starting a stage, as drop-in/drop-out co-op is not implemented, and select a difficulty level.

Some of the stages are specifically built to make it more challenging with two players. While you can be reasonably certain that Lynch will be able to handle his own when he goes off somewhere, that certainty may go out the window when you've got a human on the other joystick.

It is a classic catch-22. While a certain stage may be super tough on your own, and seemingly unbeatable, bringing in a friend may not be the best choice. Human error is always a factor, and a missed twitch could lead to a dead partner.

While each of the operatives in your group can be controlled by a single player, co-op mode adds a little into the mix. Now, each player can have his own operatives, and they can be traded from player to player in a similar method as weapons trading. If you've ever wanted to show

THINGS JUST GOT REAL

So far, *Kane & Lynch* looks like a pretty carefully crafted ride. IO Interactive described it to us as a "story driven crime drama," and they seem to be living up to that name. There are little touches throughout the game that hint at deep emotional connections between the characters. Exposition is limited to areas where it makes sense, rather than text-heavy loading screens. Everything you need to know, and some things that you don't, is delivered through dialogue.

Pardon the cliche, but *Kane & Lynch* is high octane. It blends *Hitman*-style infiltration sequences and *Freedom Fighters*-style intense action scenes into something new and exciting. The idea of single player co-op is still pretty new in action games, but IO Interactive and Eidos's *Kane & Lynch: Dead Men* is definitely a good start. Seamless and challenging co-op play in the privacy of your own home, with a dash of a few classic buddy movies? Sounds great!

HARDCORE
REVIEWS

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HGM REVIEW GAUGE

5 = Really Good
4 = Good
3 = Average
2 = Bad
1 = Really Bad

HEAVENLY SWORD™



Astute gamers will have heard the name *Heavenly Sword* bandied about for a fair few years now. Development first began in 2003 by Just Add Monsters, though it was imperiled by the bankruptcy of Argonaut Games. JAM reformed as Ninja Theory in late 2004. Once E3 hit in 2005, Ninja Theory wowed the world with two things: *Heavenly Sword* and the phrase "PS3 exclusive." Now it's late 2007 and *Heavenly Sword* is shipping to stores. Is it worth the hype? Survey says... yes.

The combat was well worth the wait. Nariko, the red-haired heroine of *Heavenly Sword*, has three stances to fight in while using the eponymous weapon. Range stance utilizes a blade on the end of a chain. You can use it to keep enemies at bay, sling debris around the area, or set up an air combo. It isn't very powerful offensively, but it can lead to great things.

The Power and Speed stances will probably be used much more often. These are the hard-hitting and fast-moving stances. Speed stance is the default and gives your attacks a bluish tinge. Nariko can string attacks together in combos which vary from simple slices to flips, turns, and pirouettes. Power stance shifts her grip on the sword. It's slower than Speed stance, but much more powerful. She can knock enemies down like tenpins and kill them with no trouble at all.

On top of these stances, however, are the Superstyles. Fighting game aficianados know them better as super moves. Once a meter is filled to a certain level, Nariko will be able to pull off a super move. There are three possible levels, and each stance has a move for each level. These moves can kill one enemy instantly, knock a bunch of enemies back, or slaughter an entire room of foes. They are incredibly flashy, and often brutal.

Flashy is the name of the game, however. The more stylish your fighting moves, and the longer you go without getting hit, the more you fill a meter at the bottom of your screen. Depending on the level of the meter, you can earn up to three Glyphs per chapter. Glyphs, other than serving as a performance grade, unlock new combos, Superstyles, concept art, and videos.

Review by 4thletter









Rating: Teen (Blood, Language, Suggestive Themes, Violence) | **Publisher:** Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Ninja Theory | **Release Date:** 9/12/07 | **Genre:** Action | **Category:** Heavenly | **# of Players:** 1

POETRY IN MOTION CAPTURE

Heavenly Sword goes a step farther than most motion-captured games do. Andy Serkis, the actor who portrayed Gollum in *Lord of the Rings*, is the Dramatic Director for the game and brings his mo-cap expertise into play.

Every inch of an actor's body and face is captured, resulting in realistic expressions and body language. There are scenes that work simply because of the true-to-life body language and don't even need dialogue. When you can read disgust in someone's posture, you know that you've struck gold.

Heavenly Sword uses extraordinary character models and life-like faces to populate its CG cinemas and in-game cinemas both. The action movie feel of the game is ramped up to the max.



There is no denying that *Heavenly Sword* looks incredible. The graphics are proof positive that hi-def is the new hotness and that motion-capture will never, ever die. The environments aren't anything like the computer generated static images we used to get back in the day. There are running waterfalls, birds flying around (including a particularly evil-looking raven), and tons of things to destroy. Carts, boxes, barrels, tables, and even food abound throughout each stage. Some of it even explodes, if you're into that.

Nariko has a younger girl who she has taken in as a kind of surrogate sister. Kai is a little off in the head. She speaks to things that aren't there and is pretty much disconnected from reality. She is also extremely sick with a crossbow, to the point where she can alter the trajectory of arrows mid-flight for the perfect shot. She has no offensive capabilities beyond her arrows, so her attack buttons result in dodges and stun attacks. She will leap frog and dash through the legs of attackers, all so she can get some space to set up a killer arrow shot.

Heavenly Sword's problems are light, but still a little irritating. Beating the game unlocks Hell Mode, a harder version of the main story. The problem is that the normal story is super linear, with basically no chance of in-game decisions that affect the ride. There aren't even forks in the road to follow. In this sense, the game is very much like the action movie they set out to make.

Heavenly Sword will probably be compared to *God of War* right out of the gate, but the two games work toward different goals. Where *God of War* focused on fast-paced combat and complicated puzzles, *Heavenly Sword* takes a different approach. Speedy, stylish combat mixes with incredibly detailed cinemas and movie-style storytelling to create a game that feels like an action movie and plays like a dream.

FINAL SCORE: 4 of 5



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PLATFORM XBOX 360



BLUE DRAGON

ブルードラゴン

Review by Lympara

Publisher : Microsoft Game Studios
Developer : Mistwalker
Release Date : 8/28/2007
Rating : Teen (Crude Humor, Fantasy Violence, Mild Language)
Genre(s) : Turn-based RPG
Category : *Dragon Quest* Lite
of players : 1

In an era where games are getting ever-shorter, *Blue Dragon* is a staggeringly 16-bit, grind-happy title. You can easily complete the entirety of *Eternal Sonata* in the time you'd invest in completing any single disc of *Blue Dragon* ...and it's a three-disc game. While the "official" time for completion is usually set at forty hours, most players can expect to invest well upwards of sixty. It feels like a throwback to 1992, when RPGs were growing ever-longer as they grew more complex. A lot of people are going to enjoy that.

Even the basic concepts of the game are right out of 1992. Imagine a simplified *Final Fantasy V*, with fewer "jobs" to assign your five party members and more chances to mix 'n match cross-class skills. Throw in a little bit of *Grandia* initiative action, allowing you to charge up certain spells and attacks. Populate this game world with simple characters meant to appeal to adolescents (in 1992, after all, most gamers are still around thirteen). Now imagine a traditional menu-driven interface, and design work courtesy Akira Toriyama. Give it a plotline meant to resemble Toriyama's early action-comedy manga, like *Dr. Slump* and *Dragonball*. Finish this theoretical game off with a fantastic score by Nobuo Uematsu, suitable for listening to obsessively on your MP3 player. There; you've imagined *Blue Dragon*. To an old-school gamer, this probably sounds great, although you may find yourself wishing for more challenging battles.

Of course, *Blue Dragon* is a modern 360 game, so players have a right to go to it expecting staggering graphics. It's a game that certainly tries to deliver, running at 1080p and using extremely detailed animations that could never work on a lesser console. While its pre-rendered cut-scenes do make for some truly beautiful viewing, the in-engine graphics are more problematic. Despite running at 30 fps, it has persistent problems maintaining its framerate if too many enemies or combat animations are onscreen at once. Backgrounds are textured realistically while characters are smooth and plasticky, making interactions between the two look absolutely unconvincing. Real-time shadows don't seem to be properly anti-aliased, so they flicker unpleasantly as you move across the world map. The detail in the combat animations also makes battles needlessly time-consuming, since animations can't be skipped. The time it takes *Blue Dragon* to resolve a single random encounter would encompass at least five or six battles in a legit 1992 SNES RPG like *Final Fantasy V* .

This illustrates the fundamental problem of *Blue Dragon*: it's not 1992 anymore, and it's really hard to tolerate a game that's paced so slowly, when there's nothing really exciting or even entertaining about it. The story and characters just serve to remind you of better games Toriyama's worked on. Next to a legitimately gorgeous, high-concept, and far more efficient RPG like *Eternal Sonata*, *Blue Dragon* just doesn't have much to offer. It's not even as interesting or fun to look at as a top-drawer PS2 title like *Persona 3*.

It's not that *Blue Dragon* is a bad game. It has some legitimately entertaining moments, a few well-designed boss battles, and a really memorable soundtrack. It's just so slow-paced that it's very easy to get bored or distracted while playing it, and the simple nature of the plot and gameplay makes the slow pace seem unjustified. *Blue Dragon* ends up feeling average, when a creative team that includes Toriyama, Uematsu, and *Final Fantasy* creator Hironobu Sakaguchi should by all rights be producing must-buy games. Of course, development studio Artoon also worked on *Blue Dragon*... and they were one of the parties responsible for the jaw-droppingly awful *Vampire's Rain*. Maybe it should be a pleasant surprise that *Blue Dragon* turned out as well as it did.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by BigWorm • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

Blue Dragon is a bit slow at first, but rewards loyalty with tons of spells later in the game. I like the feature that lets players "queue" up moves, so they can release them in a particular order.

FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5







GUILTY GEAR XX ACCENT CORE

Review by Racewing

Publisher : Aksys Games
Developer : Arc System Works
Release Date : 9/11/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Fighting
Category : *Guilty Gear XX* Turbo
of players : 1-2



***Guilty Gear*'s been around a long time, and as is the case with long-running fighting games, it's had numerous sequels and upgrades in the name of balance, or just keeping things fresh. *Guilty Gear XX* has served as Arc System Works's flagship fighter, and this is its fourth and final version. Every aspect of fighting game design that Arc has learned over the years culminates here, except one. It's the one I always complain about whenever I do a *Guilty Gear* review, and as long as nothing's done about it, it will continue to be a sticking point with me, because every other fighting game on Earth has spoiled me on it by now.**



Simply put, this *Guilty Gear* has the fewest single-player options in the entire series, and it's positively deplorable. Arcade, Survival and M.O.M. mode are just a series of fights over and over again, and that's all we get. Mission Mode is axed, and any sort of Story Mode is once again gone. Unless you're a huge fan of playing repeated timed bouts without any rhyme or reason behind them, then this is strictly a two-player title. This wouldn't be so bad if either version were online, but we're not that lucky. Unless you live in a high-competition area, this game's almost useless for wasting away those lonely nights. The low price tag helps ease the sting of this fact, but only a little.

This would normally cause me to drastically lower the score of this *GGXX* revision compared to earlier installments, but to be honest, the overall gameplay's gotten so much of an upgrade that it just about makes up for it. *Accent Core* has seen numerous tweaks and revisions to character movesets, move properties, and even the overall flow of the engine to create a better fighting experience. New techniques like Throw Escapes, the Force Break (extra power granted to special moves at the cost of meter) and Slash Back (a high-risk mechanism which rewards success with a near-instant counterattack) give extra strategic options to a fighting game already rife with such, and every character plays better than they have previously. All this, and the game still looks and sounds as beautiful as ever. Turn on anti-aliasing in the options to give our eyeballs a treat. If you *do* have a steady stream of challengers to run through this game with, then you're going to be in utter heaven. This is 2D fighting bliss, the likes of which we haven't seen since the heady heydays of Capcom, SNK and Midway dominance.

If there's been a *Guilty Gear*-shaped hole in your life since *#Reload*, (or *Slash* for you importers out there), then it's time for you to upgrade. Just make sure you get it to play against other people, because it's an utter bore popping in this title with no one else around. Enjoy this last upgrade to *XX* while you can, because, if you haven't heard, the next Guilty Gear is going *threeeeee-deeeeee!*

Rating : 4 of 5



FINAL SCORE : 3.75 of 5

2nd opinion by Wanderer • **Alternate Rating :** 3.5 of 5

I never thought I'd see anyone emulate *Street Fighter II* this closely. *Accent Core* is a good time, but if you've got *#Reload*, you've got *Accent Core*.







MONSTER HUNTER FREEDOM 2

Review by James

Publisher : Capcom
Developer : Capcom
Release Date : 8/29/2007
Rating : Teen

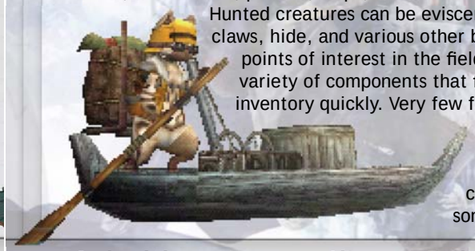
Genre(s) : Action Adventure
Category : Hunting & Gathering
of players : 1-4



I've been looking forward to *Monster Hunter Freedom 2*, so it came as a bit of a surprise to find that the rose has well and truly lost its bloom. The fun of obsessive-compulsive item management doesn't balance out an awkward fighting engine, and all the online bells and whistles in the world can't make up for the frustration of a barely functional camera. Clever extras and sub-systems are a waste if the core gameplay can't back back them up, and *MHF2* barely manages to hold its own where it really matters.

Not that there isn't a lot to like, of course. *MHF2* is a deep, gorgeous game about kicking ass in a hunter-gatherer society. The central village has an Alaskan climate, with the opening quests set in the foothills, caves, and peak of a snowy mountain before opening up into jungle, desert, volcano, etc. Quests tend be either hunting down certain monsters or gathering an amount of a specific item, but there are plenty of gathering opportunities along the way for those looking to bring as much swag back home as possible.

No matter where you go the riches of the land are spread at your feet, and can be used to create a stunning array of weapons, armor, ammunition, potions, traps, and other wonderful goodies. Hunted creatures can be eviscerated for bones, claws, hide, and various other body parts, while points of interest in the field contain a huge variety of components that fill up the limited inventory quickly. Very few found items are usable as-is, but instead must either be combined into something useful or stockpiled for weapon and armor upgrades.



Good equipment is vital. *Monster Hunter*'s wildlife doesn't play nice; it only takes one pack of carnivores working in unison to whittle the health bar down to nothing. Each weapon has certain strengths associated with it, whether it's the dual blades' charge meter that enhances attack strength when full, or the incredibly useful battle horn's musical status effects. It's just too bad that combat is where *MHF2* starts to fall apart, despite the depth of the weapon system.

The problems with combat come from a combination of the camera and slow attack speed. The really fun weapons are huge, and take just enough time to swing for even the slower enemies to work in a hit. Toss in a camera that delights in being in just the wrong place and you've got fights that quickly turn from methodical into simply frustrating.

Monster Hunter Freedom 2 is almost an amazing game. Its dozens of item systems, combat styles, quests, and online features nearly make it a must-have. If Capcom can just sort out the combat, even with something as simple as a lock-on function, I wouldn't be able to stop raving about it. As it is, though, it's merely a very fun game for those willing to overlook its problems.

Rating : 3.5 of 5



2nd opinion by Racewing • **Alternate Rating :** 3.5 of 5

I'm usually immune to "bad cameras," but this one really does get in the way. If you plan to play this game for any significant length (and there're many reasons to), be prepared to press the L button. *A lot*.

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5







PROJECT SYLPHEED™



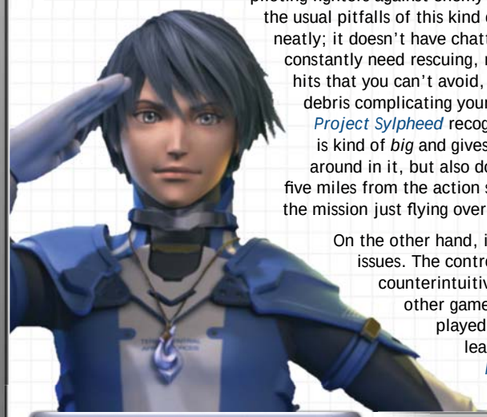
Review by Wanderer

Publisher : Square Enix
Developer : Game Arts
Release Date : 7/10/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Space Combat
Category: Fight your Family!
of players : 1

I'm a little disappointed, honestly. The *Silpheed* series used to consist entirely of shoot-'em-ups, and *Project Sylpheed* is a "Gundam"-tastic space combat/soap opera in the same vein as *Colony Wars*. It's like somebody repackaged *Gradius* as a tragic story about life, love, and giant space lasers. (Please note: *this is not a request*.)

It's set in the twenty-seventh century, as a splinter group, ADAN, suddenly launches a series of attacks on Terran colonists. Talented Young Protagonist Katana Faraway and his Nonthreatening Female Companion Ellen Bernstein are in the first squad to face attack. As Katana, you'll be on the front lines throughout the ensuing civil war, and so will your old buddy Margras Mason, the Angsty Antagonist Blinded By Grief And Also Rage, who's on ADAN's side.



Project Sylpheed's action is all space combat, with you piloting fighters against enemy ships. It avoids the usual pitfalls of this kind of game fairly neatly; it doesn't have chatty wingmen who constantly need rescuing, random cheap hits that you can't avoid, or tons of space debris complicating your flight path. *Project Sylpheed* recognizes that space is kind of *big* and gives you room to fly around in it, but also doesn't stick you five miles from the action so you burn half the mission just flying over there.

On the other hand, it has a few issues. The controls are either counterintuitive or unlike any other game you've ever played, so there's a learning curve. *Project Sylpheed* costs forty bucks, making this a budget title, but it's hard to play unless you're playing in HD. In SD, the minimap is useless and targets' names are illegible, making the game extremely difficult after the first mission or so. In HD, the visual problems vanish, making this a budget title aimed at gamers that aren't on a budget. This is odd.

The storyline is also pretty blatantly Random Anime Plot #524, complete with entire battleships crewed with what appear to be fourteen-year-old girls (this is seriously what a "Nadesico" game would look like), but that's forgivable, naturally. That's not what brought us here. We came here to shoot down enemy spacecraft, and that part of the game is frequently entertaining.



Project Sylpheed is aimed directly at gamers who are already expert at this particular breed of shooter, who like anime, and who have HD television sets, which means its target demographic is about three guys. Of those three guys, one of them probably has a 360.

If you're not that guy, then what we've got here is a forty-dollar 360 game from an underrepresented genre that may not be quite good enough to hold your attention for the time it would take to master it. Your mileage may vary, of course; this is the sort of game that inspires either rabid, forum-war-igniting fandom or complete indifference. I tend to lean towards the latter.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by Racewing • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

Sylpheed is very pretty. It's also fanservice-, weapon- and action-packed. Unfortunately, the gameplay inexplicably annoys the *daylights* out of me. If this had been 2D, or on rails, this probably would have been a dream come true.







SOUL NOMAD & the World Eaters™



Review by Wanderer

Publisher : NIS America
Developer : NIS America
Release Date : 9/25/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Strategy/RPG
Category : Not What You Think
of players : 1

I usually hate describing games in terms of what other games they are most like, but I'm making an exception here. If NIS America's previous games, from *Disgaea* on down, were *Shining Force*, *Soul Nomad* is *Fire Emblem*.

The previous games gave you control of an army made of individual characters, while *Soul Nomad* has you fielding small, fully customizable battalions. Every exchange of fire you have with an enemy unit has a certain amount of risk, giving *Soul Nomad* a higher challenge and a lower margin of error than any NIS game before it.



You begin the game as a nameless protagonist who's just been handed a brand-new sword. Unfortunately, it contains the soul of Gig, a powerful megalomaniac who tried to blow up the world for laughs two hundred years ago. Gig's old minions, the World Eaters, are slowly starting to wake back up, and the plan is basically to hope that you can use Gig's power to destroy them without falling under his control. It is not a terribly *good* plan, as it involves running up to a three-hundred-foot-tall death machine and poking it in the jibblies with a sword, but it's all you've got.

Constructing units in *Soul Nomad* involves purchasing them, then creating a "room" to stick them in. Each type of character has a different effect depending on where they're standing in a room, and the room's current leader determines what kind of battlefield unit the room winds up being. When the room attacks another unit, the defender gets a free counterattack.

That forms the root of the game's strategy. Any single unit may be unbeatable on paper, but one lucky counterattack that takes out its cleric can turn it into a liability. Every rule in the game has an exception or two, which can turn a theoretically unbeatable strategy into suicide in the course of a couple of minutes.

Before you start to think that sounds too simple, you also have to consider characters' movement rates, terrain bonuses, current items, tactical options, and experience points. *Soul Nomad* eases you into it, but it can be *remarkably* complex.

It's also extremely random, for want of a better word. You can't control where each character in a unit will attack, or prevent your vulnerable back and middle ranks from being attacked by the enemy's ranged units. You may skate through three maps, or you might have an otherwise-unstoppable room get wiped out because the enemy got a lucky crit. That, and the increasingly stripped-down presentation of the game, prevent me from giving *Soul Nomad* an unqualified recommendation

There's a specific kind of strategy gamer that's going to eat this sort of thing up with a spoon, and it's not the same kind of gamer that generally goes for the NIS formula. Soul Nomad is a surprisingly radical departure from type for NIS, and it's largely successful. It's just more frustrating than it needs to be.



Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.25 of 5

2nd opinion by Iaian • **Alternate Rating :** 2.5 of 5

Soul Nomad is everything NIS games aren't. Spending hours fighting a random generator to play an on-rails paper-thin game is not fun.







WILD ARMS 5

Review by Lynxara

Publisher : XSEED
Developer : Media Vision
Release Date : 8/28/2007
Rating : Teen (Fantasy Violence, Mild Language, Suggestive Themes)

Genre(s) : Turn-based RPG
Category : Wild, Wild West
of players : 1



There is plenty about *Wild Arms 5* that seems intended for a hardcore fan of the series. You can meet characters and acquire costumes that Google reveals to be from every single prior *Wild Arms* title. I am not myself a huge fan of *Wild Arms*, and haven't played any previous game in the series in critical depth. I'm approaching *Wild Arms 5*, more or less, as if it were just another PS2 RPG.

WA5 uses the "hex" battle system that previously appeared in *Wild Arms 4*. Battles place characters on a field of hexagonal tiles, some with elemental properties. In random encounters, allies, enemies and elements are placed on the field at random. Attacks, spells, and special attacks affect every character or monster standing within a given hex. You can exploit this to tremendous advantage in combat, and your enemy can do the same. It's interesting and has a lot of potential.

Since you always begin battle at full HP in *WA5*, most enemies are able to do unusually large amounts of damage. Your characters can only take two or three hits, and the same goes for enemies. In random encounters, this often means that whether or not you win a battle comes down to whether or not you got initiative. *WA5* lets you replay losing battles, so you often end up milling them until you get a random arrangement that isn't lethal. This kind of combat balance just isn't fun.



When you're not in combat, you get to run around as the protagonist. On the expansive world map you can't do much but go from point A to point B, but dungeons are more interesting. There, Dean can shoot objects with his guns (called ARMs), or solve platformer-style puzzles involving switches and boxes. These puzzles are simple but have a pleasant, *Zelda*-like charm to them, and get more fun as you discover more types of ammunition for Dean tackle problems with

There's action elements to the platforming, too, but they really don't work thanks to questionable physics. Dean slips and slides on dirt and grass the way Mario slides on ice. Where you can stand doesn't map properly to the visuals, so occasionally you can position Dean such that he's hovering in mid-air. This is part of a general problem with clunky graphics; texture work is minimal, and jaggies are omnipresent to a degree that's not really excusable so late in the PS2's lifespan.

If you managed to be indifferent to the graphics, you're going to run into something far harder to ignore: shoddy localization. Weird grammar, odd word choices, and confusing mistranslations abound. Some hints are unintelligible; a character wielding one sword may be instructed to do a "twin sword" attack when it's actually time for them to team up with another swordsman. The English dub is poor, in terms of both casting and performance. This is hard to accept with no alternative Japanese language track, and no way to shut voices off during cutscenes.

When I was between buzz-kills, I actually had a lot of fun playing *Wild Arms 5*. The Southwestern designs are inspired, the characters are expressive, and the soundtrack is a fantastic homage to Ennio Morricone's spaghetti Western scores. Unfortunately, there's just too much about the game that doesn't work to counter-balance all of the good stuff. It's impossible to recommend when an RPG fan could be playing better things instead.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by Racewing • Alternate Rating : 3 of 5

The *WA5* experience switches regularly between frustration and euphoria. Still, if you've beaten all the A-list PS2 RPGs up until now, this one won't hurt. Plus, the soundtrack is *sweet*.







COMBAT MISSION SHOCK FORCE

Review by Kou Aidou

Publisher : Paradox Interactive
Developer : Big Time Software
Release Date : 8/22/2007
Rating : Teen

Genre(s) : Strategy
Category : Modern Warfare
of players : 1-2



Strategy is a tricky genre for games. While some genres can fall back on presentation if the programming isn't 100% solid, strategy games require complex AI and intuitive gameplay interfaces. If these aspects aren't spot-on perfect, there's simply no reason to play. Combat Mission: Shock Force nobly sacrifices presentation for complexity, but sadly, it fails to deliver on the gameplay front.

It's clear that some aspects of the game have gotten a lot of consideration. The units accurately reflect current military technology for all the countries involved, and there's an emphasis on realistic military tactics. On top of an official campaign, there's about two dozen free-play missions included, and an in-depth scenario creator. All missions can be played in either real-time or turn-based formats, with multiplayer options through network, LAN, or hotseat play.

A lot of thought was put into the premise, as well. The decision to set a game in a near-future war between the US and Syria could be seen as controversial, so the developers included an explanation of their decision in the instruction manual. The game is not an endorsement, but is meant to demonstrate the impracticality of such a war by realistically portraying the Syrian army's ability to defend itself on its native soil. When developers literally want to use their game to make the world a better place, it's hard to be too hard on them.

Unfortunately, while the game may have been meant for people who have pre-existing knowledge of military tactics, it's nearly inaccessible to those who do not. Even a basic tutorial like the kind Paradox Interactive includes in its games could have been a lifesaver, but anyone who hasn't played the earlier *Combat Mission* games will instead be required to navigate the intimidating 200-page manual full of poorly-organized information just to figure out how to get started.



That said, even those who can appreciate the game's realism are unlikely to forgive the clunky mouse-scrolling camera controls (with no mini-map for quick jumping), the awkward hotkey-based control interface, or the terrible unit pathfinding AI. One of the strengths of the game is the way it allows you to play any mission in a variety of ways, but given how long it takes to give a unit a correct order and navigate the abysmal camera to its destination, they might as well have not even bothered with the real-time option.

While the decision to scale back the graphics to compensate for the game's complexity is a respectable one, the game lacks any real sense of artistry that could have been achieved even with simple graphics; each mission in identical-looking desert landscape. There's a rather cool fusion of traditional middle eastern music and modern rock that serves as the main theme, but otherwise, the soundtrack mostly consists of unit calls and tank noises.

The developers' chutzpah regarding the *Shock Force*'s premise is admirable, and if you fall into the game's narrow audience, there may be a lot to like about it. Still, they have done their core concepts a great disservice, both by alienating series newcomers and failing to properly streamline the game's interface.

Rating : 3 of 5

2nd opinion by Lynxara • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

An unapologetically niche title with obvious depth in the gameplay, and no interest at all in creating a comprehensible interface for newcomers. Poor graphics don't help the package hold your interest long, either.

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5







DIGIMON WORLD DATA SQUAD

Review by Racewing

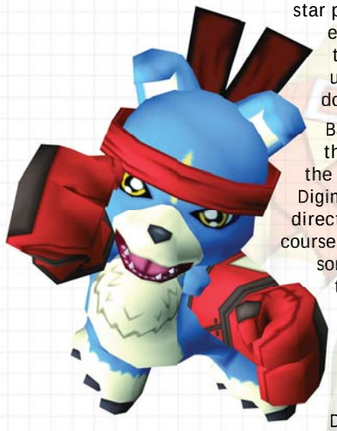
Publisher : Namco Bandai
Developer : Bec
Release Date : 9/18/2007
Rating : Everyone 10+ (Crude Humor, Mild Fantasy Violence, Mild Language)

Genre(s) : RPG
Category : Collectible Monsters
of players : 1



Nintendo may have a stranglehold on the US monster-raising market, but there have always been up-and-comers to steal (or feed upon) its thunder. Long before *Spectrobes* managed to carve a niche, longtime *Pokemon* rival *Digimon* was there, cultivating its own significant fanbase through years of animation and games.

It's for this fanbase that *Digimon World: Data Squad* was made, as it's otherwise pretty much your standard cel-shaded, techno-music-laden, anime-inspired (it's actually based on the new season of the dubbed Digimon anime series hitting the airwaves this fall) Japanese RPG that coasts on its star power… such as it is. I'm not even going to *try* to describe the plot to you. I still don't understand it myself, and I don't think I ever will.



Battles are turn-based, and the big "hook" of this game is the ability to evolve your various Digimon in several different directions, either during the course of battle or outside of it. It's somewhat novel, considering that evolution can happen at whatever pace you want, and said pace is affected by how much you and your Digimon are in sync during the course of battle. Each Digimon has several potential forms, and these forms can be switched almost at will. Why switch evolutionary forms when one has inherently higher stats than the other? That would be where elemental properties come into play. Remember those? They're in every monster game ever made. Still, it works here.

This game's big annoyance is the random encounter rate. Remember *Skies of Arcadia*? Remember *Suikoden IV*? We're talking those levels of irritation here. Run around for eight to ten seconds, then fight. Repeat until you throw the disc across the room. On the plus side, it's good for gaining levels; however, solving the environmental puzzles is trying enough without losing your bearings every time you're about to regain them. It creates a huge learning curve at the start of the game that one wouldn't expect. However, once you're past it (around the time you defeat the second boss, really), you've got a pretty powerful team on your hands to guide you through the rest of the game.

I'll be honest here: *Data Squad* really isn't going to make a lot of converts. These kinds of licensed games know exactly who they're for, and those are the people who are going to buy them. However, it's at least good to know that the game isn't a total clunker. It has some good ideas, and certainly proves itself to be more far fun than, say, *Mega Man Star Force*. Factor in the large cast of 'mon and exclusive series canon characters, and *Digimon*, fans already know what to do. The rest of us…well, if you've already beaten the living crap out of *Pokemon Diamond/Pearl*, this might not be a bad shot.

Rating : 3 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3 of 5

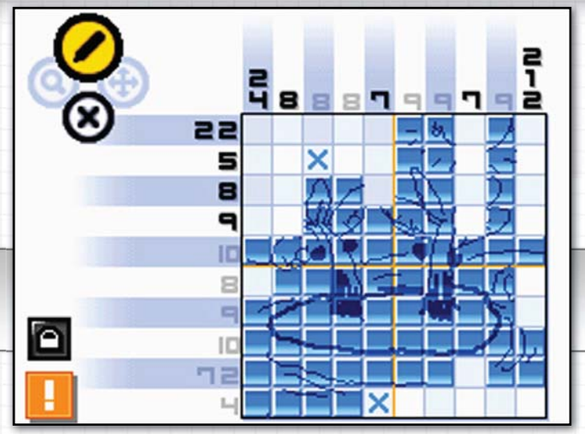
2nd opinion by Wanderer • **Alternate Rating :** 3 of 5

To really enjoy this game, I think you have to be about eleven years old and a big *Digimon* fan. I am neither.









PICROSS DS

Review by James

Publisher : Nintendo
Developer : Jupiter
Release Date : 7/30/2007
Rating : Everyone

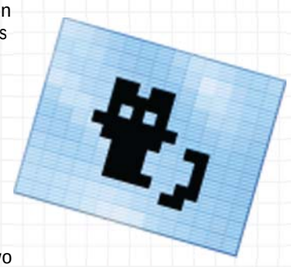
Genre(s) : Puzzle
Category : Pixel Art
of players : 1-5

Simple can be wonderful. A clear set of rules with limited complications can lead to logic puzzles of amazing beauty. The downside of only having a few rules, of course, is that it only takes a small thing to throw off the balance. Much as it hurts to say, *Picross DS*'s brain-crushingly addictive logic problems have one small interface issue that adds an unnecessary touch of aggravation to the harder puzzles comprising the heart of the game.



First, the good stuff. Picross is played on a grid with sets of numbers running along the top and left-hand side. The numbers tell how many of the row or column's empty squares to fill in, with at least one space left blank between one number and the next. 2, 3, 3, for example, would mean a row of two blocks followed by three followed by three. Fitting them in to a ten by ten grid is dead easy, seeing as there's only one place for them to go. Two blocks plus a space (either left blank or marked with an X to show nothing goes there) plus three plus space plus three equals ten. Those same numbers on a fifteen by fifteen grid, on the other hand, could go just about anywhere, seeing as there's now seven spaces left unaccounted for. Fill in every square in the grid and you get a complete puzzle showing a pixel-art picture.

The easiest puzzles are set on five by five grids, great for getting the hang of things and fun for a quick blast. Medium bumps the grid size to ten by ten, but the majority of the puzzles are fifteen by fifteen or greater, and that's where operational difficulties come into play.



The 5x5 and 10x10 grids fit on one screen, with all elements visible at all times. The 15x15 grids, on the other hand, introduce magnifying and scrolling tools, and all of a sudden important information is disappearing off the side of the screen as you scroll around. The row/column numbers for the highlighted square and its two neighbors are superimposed on the magnified grid, and the entire puzzle is shown on the top screen, but it's still a pain to work around when juggling multiple possible solutions. You can eliminate the issue entirely by switching to standard d-pad and buttons, but that feels nothing but awkward after the smooth, intuitive stylus controls. A combination d-pad and stylus control method works as a decent compromise, but it's still somewhat clunky after the instant clarity of the earlier puzzles.

There's more good than bad in *Picross*, though, even taking into account my retail copy crashing once after completing a puzzle. The Daily Picross challenge is a great way to chart your increasing skills, downloadable content adds new puzzles to an already respectable library, and you can even create new puzzles to share with friends. Best of all, *Picross* is a wonderfully pure test of logical puzzle solving, with a deep challenge that's as satisfying as it is addictive.

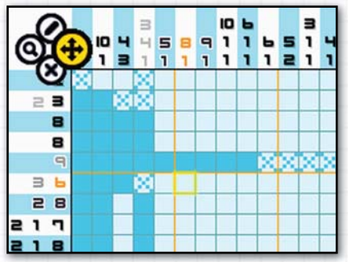
Rating : 4 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 4 of 5

2nd opinion by Kou Aidou • **Alternate Rating :** 4 of 5

I was too hard on Picross DS in my import review, partly because I didn't realize how many unlockable Free stages there were. I still think auto-correct should have been optional and not a determiner of difficulty, though.









SMASH COURT TENNIS 3





Publisher : Bandai-Namco Games
Developer : Namco
Release Date : 7/11/2006
Rating : Everyone

Genre(s) : Sports
Category : Tennis
of players : 1-2

The universe can be a strange and recursive place. After the success of *Pong* in the early '70s, a real world version called "Tennis" gained popularity, with the paddles replaced by real people holding tennis racquets and the white square reimagined as a fuzzy green ball. Nowadays *Pong* has gone the way of the pet rock, but video game versions of its spawn still pop up here and there. *Smash Court Tennis 3* is the latest, and its a solid if uninspired version of the sport.



If you've played any sports game in your entire life you've got a good idea of what to expect. The main career mode starts off with a player-created no-skills newbie slowly working her way up the ranking ladder. A helpful tutorial explains every aspect of the shot system, and then it's off to the pro circuit and an attempt at fame and glory. Winning matches and successfully training earns experience, and going up a level earns skill points that can be used to either improve your pro's overall stats or buy new abilities, such as special shots, better fatigue recovery, or improved shot proficiency.

There are five shot types to learn, each having its own effect on the ball, and figuring out when to use them is half the challenge. Mastering the shots, learning how to place them and how much power to use, will send your opponents flying around the court desperately racing to keep up. Anything less will earn painful defeat, sadly free of McEnroe-esque histrionics, and the nagging feeling that this isn't as fun as it might be.

For those looking for something a little quicker than a major pro quest, *SCT3* comes equipped with several game modes featuring sixteen real-world tennis stars to choose from. Multiplayer is limited to two people, so four-player mixed doubles is out, but the real treat is found in the mini-game section of the Challenge mode. Galaga Tennis isn't anything major, but Pac-Man and Bomb Tennis are good fun. Hitting Pac-Man back and forth over a court set on top of a dot-filled maze, dodging ghosts while the score rises as Pac eats any pellets he lands on, is bizarre and entertaining. Bomb Tennis does that one better, however, with a bomb-ball that explodes once it takes too many hard hits. Missing a return shot causes bombs to rain down onto your side of the court, and it only takes one explosion to cause a chain reaction that blots out the screen. Simple and addictive, Bomb Tennis turned out to be the most fun part of the whole package.

For those looking for a more serious tennis game, *Smash Court Tennis 3* delivers solid gameplay that, while hardly revolutionary, still accomplishes a decent challenge. It's a bit strange that the best part is found in the mini-games, but *SCT3* manages a decent all-around game that, while it won't set anyone's world on fire, won't disappoint the tennis fans either.

Rating : 3.5 of 5

FINAL SCORE : 3.5 of 5

2nd opinion by Dack • **Alternate Rating :** 3.5 of 5

Unless you are a Tennis fanatic or love seeing hot sweaty men run in short pants, there's no reason to buy this if you already own *Virtua Tennis: World Tour*, a superior game at the same price.









SPIDER-MAN PINBALL

Publisher: Stern Pinball
Developer: Stern Pinball
Genre(s): Pinball
Category: MULTIBALL!
Release Date: May 2007
of Players: 1-4

What you see on this page is not an illusion, nor a cruel joke. This is real review in a real game magazine about a new pinball game. Pins have not disappeared; in fact, they are doing fairly well thanks to a little company called Stern Pinball. However, pinball machines have been all but forgotten by most of the gaming press (along with arcade machines).

Spider-Man is the latest pin from Stern. It was released in conjunction with the feature film *Spider-Man 3* earlier this year, although it is based on the entire trilogy of films. Artwork from each movie appears on the table along with villians like the Green Goblin, Doctor Octopus, Venom, and Sandman. Each character appears on the table as a detailed, movable figure that you battle by hitting targets near them. The orange monochrome display above the table also recreates (in limited form) certain scenes from the movies. The marquee itself includes an artwork montage from the movies and easily catches the eye.

The table is well-designed and includes three ball flippers and a number of targets for the player to aim at. Once you launch the ball, it falls into a small area with a few bumpers and lanes that score you a few points before the real game begins. It's worth noting that the ball can get stuck in the initial area, which may call for a slight bump to the cabinet.

The object of the game, once you can influence the ball's motion, is to battle the villains from the movies. The first objective is to aim for the green stand-up targets to battle the Green Goblin, which are located on the left side of the table. Then aim for the right "Web-Slinger" hole to battle Doc Ock; shoot the yellow targets to battle Sandman and shoot the side ramp with the upper flipper to battle Venom. As each villian is defeated (by hitting the right targets and making good shots) you will receive an extra ball. By defeating them more than once you can activate other special modes of play. To get multiball, hit the white standup target and then shoot the left and right loops. While it requires appropriate timing and a little skill to place your shots right, the table was designed with the physics necessary to make struggling for just the right shot enjoyable. The addition of the story makes it that much sweeter.

Tournament play is available for multiple players, activated via a separate start button. Whether you play *Spider-Man* alone or with friends, it is a fun game that offers an experience that can only be found on an actual pinball table. As hard as video console pinball tries, it never will be the same as the real thing. Fortunately, *Spider-Man* is a very popular pin and it shouldn't be difficult to find at a local arcade or other venue.



GET CHA! GOTCHA! OOOH~

ONLINE GAMER

Preview by BigWynn



In these modern times where its seems that everyone from your boss to your mother is constantly barking orders, it's nice to be considered an exalted potentate for once. That's why I love playing *Overlord*, as I never tire of my lowly minions happily sacrificing their lives upon command. Talk about an ego boost!

After beating the single player story, I decided to go online and bend real people to my will. The first thing that I noticed is that none of the armor, weapons, spells, or extra minions earned from singleplayer transfer over to the multiplayer experience. This means that all players start every match on even terms with the same amount of spells and minions, so time becomes an important factor in amassing a deadly horde to decimate rivals. Relying on the default settings for the entire match is tantamount to suicide. Also, don't be discouraged if there are no servers to join; it just means that you need to host a game. Doing so gives you zero ping and lets you customize the options, however limited they may be.



The co-op survival mode makes two Overlords work together to survive as long as possible. Two small maps are available for this mode. One is a dark and eerie Dwarf-infested cave called Gates of Destruction while the other, Last Stand, takes place on grassy plains filled with insects and other creatures.

During my first match, the other player didn't use his headset, so we couldn't strategize. When the round started, he ran off into the sunset and died in less than three minutes. What did I learn from this? When joining every co-op game, speak to your teammate before it begins. If there is no response, leave immediately.

Competitive modes consist of both Versus-Slaughter (players gain points by killing NPCs and their opponent), and Versus-Pillage (players acquire gold by looting enemies, houses, and killing their opponent). Fighting your adversary doesn't usually happen as often in Pillage, but it's a good idea to always keep an eye out for the other Overlord.

Players can choose from two separate maps for each versus mode, and they are not only larger than co-op maps, but they also resemble singleplayer levels. In addition, they have more variety in NPC enemies and additional tower objects that grant spells and health/mana bonuses.



Just like single player, several impediments exist that require a finite set of minions to move or certain type to eliminate (like red minions removing fire barriers). Budding gremlin commanders can also kill rival minions carrying tower objects and steal them. Anyone intent on killing the rival Overlord should target him with the left trigger and send their minions using the right trigger. Simply 'sweeping' them in the direction of the opponent isn't very effective, as they will stop to attack any enemy NPCs or minions in their path.

OVERLORD

IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS ITS WAY, YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO PLAY HALF THE GAMES IN THIS MAGAZINE.

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ON THE DOWNLOAD

GAMES YOU CAN DOWNLOAD AND PLAY ON YOUR CONSOLES AND COMPUTERING MACHINES



Developer: Llamasoft • Platform: XBox 360
Genre: Shooter • Category: Brain Trance • # of Players: 1
Price: 400 points ($5) • Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

SPACE GIRAFFE

Space Giraffe is not ***Tempest***. Despite a superficial similarity, subtle clues such as "playing completely and utterly unlike ***Tempest***" give the secret away. It takes a bit of learning, and getting started can be confusing, but experience reveals the incredible strategies hiding beneath ***Space Giraffe***'s shooty exterior.



A yellow claw runs along the top of a series of lanes. Shooting the advancing enemies works just fine, but most of them can be bulled off the web's rim for massive score bonuses. Bulling several enemies at once earns a score multiplier, but it only works so long as there's power in the Power Zone. Whenever you do something, whether it's using a jump powerup or shooting an enemy, a line of light on the web grows into the distance. The line is always shrinking unless it's being filled, and when it's gone the Power Zone is empty. An empty Power Zone not only lessens the giraffe's firepower but means any enemy can kill it, so figuring out Power Zone manipulation strategies is half the game.

The other half is sorting out which enemies do what, and when it's best to forgo bonus points from bulling them to instead shoot through to the danger they're covering. Action and strategy and pure visual overload combine into an arcade game as deep as it is chaotic, and a goofy sense of humor ties it all together. Most importantly, ***Space Giraffe*** is pure addictive fun, constantly demanding one more round as the pulsing light melts your eyes out of their sockets.

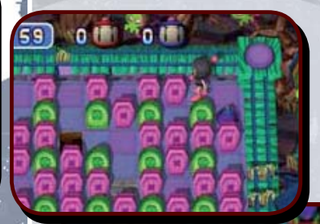
SCORE: 5 OF 5

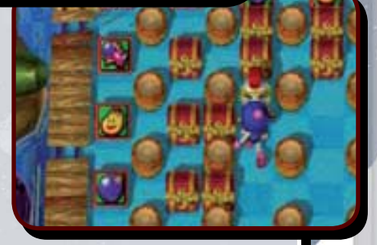


Developer: Backbone Entertainment
Platform: Xbox 360 • Genre: Bomberman
Category: Pure Chaos
of Players: 1-8 • Price: 800 points ($10)
Get it at: Xbox Live Arcade

BOMBERMAN LIVE

We've been waiting for this for years and it's finally here. ***Bomberman Live*** is pure, classic ***Bomberman*** taken online with up to eight players adding to the chaos at once. Almost every aspect of the fight is customizable, from basics such as time limit and number of wins to the championship to more advanced options like weapon loadout. For extra insanity, the Revenge mode from the Saturn game returns, allowing defeated Bombermen to throw bombs from the sidelines after being defeated, and there's no denying the satisfaction of taking out the bastard who nailed you first.





Unfortunately there's not much of a single player mode, seeing as it's just multiplayer with AI bots, but this isn't called ***Bomberman Live*** by a random act of branding. While a few more arenas would have been nice, this is the ultimate modern ***Bomberman***, and one of the best multiplayer games around.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



Developer: Housemarque • Platform: PS3
Genre: Shooter • Category: Lots o' Rocks
of Players: 1-2 • Price: $9.99
Get it at: Playstation Network

SUPER STARDUST HD

Super Stardust HD plays like a cross between ***Asteroids*** and ***Geometry Wars*** set high above a planet's surface, with enemies and asteroids entering orbit and cluttering up the sky. There are three types of asteroids corresponding to the three primary weapons, all color-coded for your shooting convenience.





The spread gun is most effective against standard rocks, the laser whip makes short work of gold asteroids and most enemies, and the straight-shot blue gun tears through ice and bosses alike. All the guns are at least somewhat effective in all situations, but you can also just bomb everything into next week when things get too hairy. The levels are arbitrarily long, though, with no indicator of how you're progressing until the last few enemies appear. A high-score run on ***Super Stardust HD*** is more a marathon than sprint, but it's still the best thing running on the PS3.

SCORE: 4.5 OF 5



Developer: PopCap Games • Platform: PC
Genre: Shooter • Category: Trick Shot
of Players: 1 • Price: $19.95
Get it at: http://www.popcap.com/

VENICE

Popcap's newest casual addiction is ***Venice***, a pleasantly fun time-waster with a decidedly odd premise. A boat floats on the waters as Venice sinks under the sea, and shooting treasures into their corresponding outlines on blocks is the only way to save the town from a watery doom. Rings, amphoras, lyres, hearts, stars, and more (but no yellow moons or green clovers) get shot into their respective places, frequently requiring a timed- or bank-shot. Powerups are awarded for combos, which happen when a

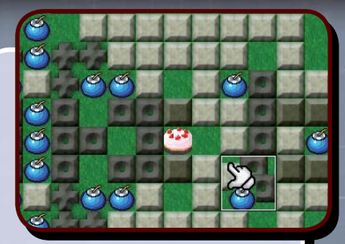






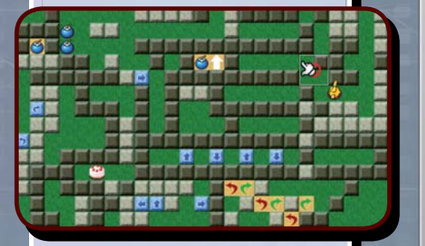
treasure lands high up and sends copies of itself tumbling down to land in lower matching slots, and exploiting them can lead to huge chain reactions that clear the levels quickly. This is especially important in the secondary game mode, where constantly rising water keeps the pressure on. Despite its simplicity, ***Venice*** is surprisingly addictive, and is a great way to while away the low-key gaming hours.

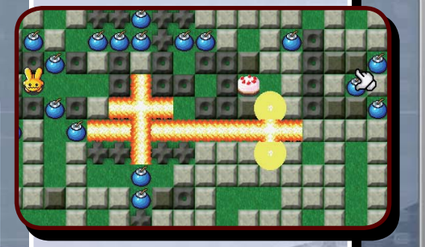
SCORE: 4 OF 5



Developer: Scarsoft • Platform: PC
Genre: Maze/Puzzle • Category: Brain Crusher
of Players: 1 • Price: $14.99
Get it at: http://www.scarsoft.com

BOLT BRAIN TEASERS





Bolt Brain Teasers is a mouse-controlled maze game about creating a clear path for a little yellow bunny through the chaos of blocks that stand between it and a delicious cake reward. Each level has a set amount of tools for sliding, turning, or exploding the blocks in your way, but because there's only one solution, and the tools can be used almost anywhere, in any order, there are an overwhelming number of ways to screw up the more complex puzzles. There's nothing wrong with a good challenge, but clearing out even the easiest of what ***Bolt*** mockingly refers to as "Main Game" (as opposed to the three easier sets of thirty puzzles) is cause for smug satisfaction tinged with relief. There's a sweet spot between tutorial-easy and brain-crushing tough, and ***Bolt*** doesn't spend a lot of time there. ***Bolt Brain Teasers*** is worth checking out, though, for scarily smart or masochistic gamers.

SCORE: 3.5 OF 5

Downloaded by James

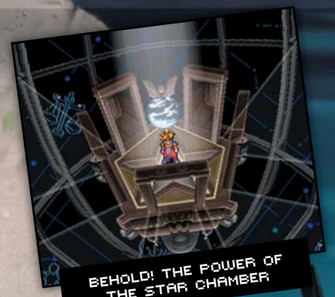
GRAVEYARD

R.I.P.

Terranigma



POISONOUS SKIES, BUT THE SUNSETS ARE AMAZING!



BEHOLD! THE POWER OF THE STAR CHAMBER



DUDE, CHECK OUT YOUR HAND... WHOA.

US RPG fans got screwed more often than not in the 16-bit days, even if many of the games they desperately wanted and never got to play ended up better in imagination than reality. Other than learning Japanese, there wasn't much to be done about playing games like *Seiken Densetsu 3*, *Dragon Quest V* and *VI*, and more *Fire Emblems* than you can shake a stick at. *Terranigma*, on the other hand, was an even bigger screw-over than normal, because an English translation was released in Europe. For fans of *Soul Blazer* and *Illusion of Gaia*, this was, to put it tactfully, unkind.

Terranigma opens in the typical peaceful village so many RPGs like to kick things off in, complete with oversleeping but rambunctious hero being woken up by his cute female childhood friend. Piling that much cliché in one place is most likely a move to lull the player into a feeling of comfortable familiarity, seeing as the plot grows very strange, very quickly. The crystal blue, which looks remarkably like giant soap bubbles drifting through the air, is particularly thick that day, and the villagers can see other lives in other worlds reflected on the surface if they look closely. Seeing as nothing exists outside the village, this is more than a little strange.

There's a big world outside, of course, and Ark gets thrust into it when he accidentally turns everyone in the village to blue glass. Whoops. Time to venture outside, then, and see that the village actually exists under the skin of the planet, with the villagers' souls trapped in temples on rocky continents floating in seas of lava. Completing the temples does more than bring back the villagers, though, it also sets into motion events leading to waking up the world.

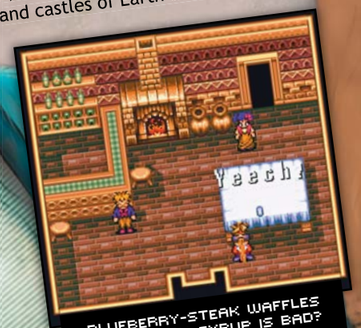
Our world. Earth. Apparently it's all but dead. How'd that happen?

The Earth has become a barren chunk of poisonous rock where nothing can live, but that's nothing that can't be fixed by running through dungeons while smacking monsters around. *Terranigma*'s mysterious storyline is complemented by a fun action-oriented fighting engine. Ark wields a spear which, despite the single attack button, can throw out a decent number of attacks by combining with jumps, dashes, or simple button-mashing. There's a move for every occasion, and it can leave you wishing the dungeons had a few more critters to take out to get that fast-action feel. Most of the enemies end up as one hit wonders, after a bit of leveling up, but that helps make sorting out the complicated dungeons a bit easier.

Dungeon crawling in *Terranigma* is more than just about killing things, after all. While the caves, temples, forests, and castles of Earth aren't as



CARMEN MIRANDA HAS A MEAN FINAL FORM.



BLUEBERRY-STEAK WAFFLES WITH CURRY SYRUP IS BAD?

Platform: Super Nintendo
Publisher: Enix
Developer: Enix
Release Date: December 1996
Genre: Action RPG
Category: Planetary Reincarnation
of Players: 1



Exhumed by James



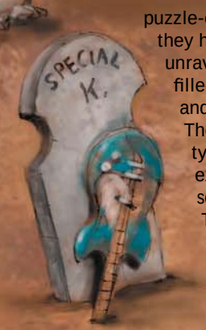
YETI LOVE FLOWER! ARK TOUCH FLOWER, YETI SMASH!



KEYSER SOZE WAS WHAT!?



ARKS NEW EXTREME SPORT, ARMOR FLOWING.



puzzle-oriented as something like *Landstalker*, they have their fair share of mysteries to unravel. The dungeons get fairly complex, filled with labyrinthine passages that twist and connect in relatively complex ways. There are a few "enter the right number"-type puzzles, but in general it's more about exploration and keeping your bearings than sorting out complex switch interactions. Tracking down the next bit of plot, on the other hand, can take a bit of doing.

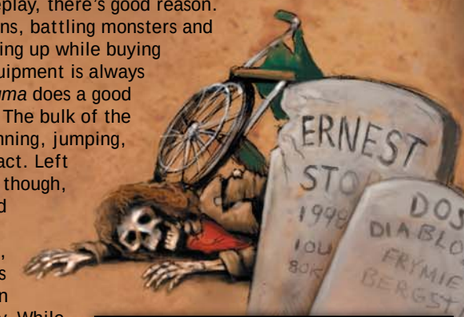
The next place to go is generally pretty obvious for the first half of the game, but once humans have been revived on Earth things get somewhat less linear. The plot only has the One True Path, but figuring out who to talk to, what they want, and where they're hiding becomes half the battle. *Terranigma* eventually builds itself a good-sized cast of characters with their own 16-bit RPG-style plots, and this is made all the more entertaining by taking place in our familiar world. You can't go wrong with finding wood in Canada to build a bridge over the Colorado River so you can walk to Brazil on a Mode 7 overworld. There's even a small plot point where Ark gets to cast his vote in a democratic election between capitalist and communist candidates.



A SLICE OF CHEESE AND YOU'VE GOT A GREAT SANDWICH.

More than just the pleasant oddness of seeing RPG conventions superimposed on Earth, what makes the tone of *Terranigma* work is a sense of mystery tinged with sadness. Death and rebirth are the central themes, with reincarnation taken as a given. This perspective permeates the plot, whether stated directly or merely hinted at, and despite *Terranigma*'s standard 16-bit quality translation (not very good and loaded with typos) the excellent music and overall presentation manage to convey the emotional hit that the text sometimes lacks. There's also plenty of humor, of course, because Ark is an upbeat, adventurous soul exploring a vibrant and lively world, but seeing a friendly animal eating the corpse of her dead husband so she'll have the strength to survive tends to stick in the memory above any wacky hijinks that may happen along the way.

If that seems like a lot of talk about story and only a little about gameplay, there's good reason. Exploring dungeons, battling monsters and bosses, and leveling up while buying ever-stronger equipment is always fun, and *Terranigma* does a good enough job at it. The bulk of the game is spent running, jumping, and fighting, in fact. Left to pure gamplay, though, *Terranigma* would be a decent if forgettable romp, but the best RPGs are a combination of game and story. While a stupid story is easily ignorable if the gameplay is good, a well-executed story can combine with "pretty good" gameplay to make something truly memorable. *Terranigma*'s main strength is how all its elements work together (with a second nod to the fantastic soundtrack), and even today that's a goal most games have a hard time reaching.





HOW LONG IS THIS TRAFFIC COP GOING TO MAKE ME WAIT?



どきどき魔女神判！

どきどきまじょしんぱん™

dokidoki majo shinpan!



Greetings to my throngs of adoring fans! With Sardius out of commission this month, your favorite fanservice-loving editor was *personally asked* to sub in for the import section, with a game that didn't escape his notice no matter how much he tried to avoid it! This month, we present you with a title that's currently famous (or infamous) for two reasons. One is the fact that it's been advertised as a game where you "touch" little girls. The other is that a good amount of the people from *Twinkle Star Sprites* worked on this puppy. Both are entirely true, but only one of these yields results that most people are expecting.

In *DDMS*, you play as Akuji Nishimura, a misbehaving junior high student. One day, the heavens charge him with the task of finding witches which have infiltrated his school. He refuses at first, but accepts under pain of being transformed into a goody-two-shoes forevermore. Accompanying him is a tiny, cute-as-a-button angel by the name of Lulu, who is predictably and humorously insane due to her frequent delusions of grandeur. Once you start the game, you're plopped into your standard text-heavy adventure game in the vein of *Phoenix Wright*, *Hotel Dusk*, or any other point-and-click adventures in the system's library. However, right off the bat you'll notice that SNK decided to be very annoying. To interact with anything in this game — items, menus, pieces of the environment — it has to be tapped *twice* in succession. Such an approach may work well when you're using a computer mouse, but on a touch screen, it's just madness. Key items can also be slid around the screen, or offscreen and into your possession.



Mostly, Akuji will be exploring the neighborhood, looking for characters to interact with (they'll show up in whatever building he enters), clues, or collectibles to advance the story. Sometimes these will be pictures of suspected witches, other times they'll be keys to unlock doors, books or trinkets that will allow you to coax information out of NPCs, and all that. You've been here before. It's all standard adventure stuff, and to be honest, if you don't know Japanese, this is going to get very boring, very fast. If you do know Japanese, the game reportedly boasts off-the-wall humor to match its character designs. However, should either party persevere, then they'll actually track down their suspect. After the music pumps up, and pre-fight banter is exchanged, the fun parts start.

First off is combat! The girl will throw various projectiles at you, which have a range of effects, from doing simple damage to messing around with the game system itself. Akuji has a blunt sword to defend himself with (drawing lines on the screen will slash against the approaching projectiles, sometimes deflecting), but magical companions (including Lulu) can be called upon to aid with various attacks, employed by placing the stylus on the attacking suspect for a short time. Deplete her energy bar and defenses, and it's time for the part everyone's waiting for!

The "witch-touching" mode is an anatomical scavenger hunt, though nowhere near in the way those words may imply. Clothes stay on, and you're ordered to touch in seemingly random places to find where they react via little hearts. You can smile/wink at the girls (or in one scenario, a boy), give them items in order to keep them placated, or even blow on them with the DS mic. Every so often, their expressions change, and you have to adapt to their new position. Once you find the right spot, you can concentrate on it, and eventually unearth the all-telling "witch-mark."

Once you manage to find the mark, you've finally beaten the chapter, and the witch you found actually ends up in your employ. She can talk to people and interact with things in ways that neither Akuji nor Lulu can. She also brings to the table a brand new attack that you can use in combat sequences. Since these combat sequences ramp up in difficulty, you're going to need all of the help you can get. Furthermore, certain bosses are vulnerable to certain types of attacks, giving the game a *Mega Man*-esque feel, if drawn out just a little too long by text-heavy adventure parts. This is my one gripe with the game, honestly. The combat parts (not the touching parts) are the highlight of the title, as they show the best design, and I'd have liked to see even more of them in proportion to the rest of the game.

Review by Racewing



PUBLISHER: SNK PLAYMORE • DEVELOPER: SNK PLAYMORE • GENRE: ADV./PUZZLE • RELEASE DATE: 7/05/2007 • # PLAYERS: 1

Worth importing?

If you're looking into this game based on its somewhat-infamous online reputation (see sidebar), don't bother. You'll be disappointed. If you like comedy and text adventure games, can read Japanese, and didn't get cavities from *Twinkle Star Sprites*, then this is the game for you! Niche? You betcha.

Score: 3 of 5

Well, What'd you expect?

Suffice to say there's no truly erotic content in here (though admittedly, there are times when the game seems to want to come as close as possible). Why? Well, just in case it's not brain-dead obvious, let's run down the facts:

- This is on a system made by Nintendo, a system whose audience involves a great number of women and impressionable children, and who as a company, has a long-standing history of rejecting games with such content.

- Said system is in the prime of its life, and very much in the public eye. If you're looking for a "traditional" dating game on a console, you'd probably do best to hunt down a dead Sega system. Such games ran rampant on the Dreamcast after its plug was officially pulled. Even then, when ported to console, nearly all line-crossing material is cut.

- The majority of the involved girls are explicitly stated on the game's official website as being anywhere from 12 to 15 years of age—below the age of consent in most countries, and the lower extreme of which dips below Japan's.

Put all of these ingredients together, and voila; you end up with a game with about as much sex as, say, *Sexy Parodius*. Furthermore, the "touching" aspect accounts for 15 percent of the game at best. The rest is running around, listening to dialogue, or maybe taking part in a short battle. Honestly, the game doesn't really *need* "action"; the touching parts can be disturbing enough for the uninitiated if you think about what you're doing too much, or pay too much attention to the girls' precocious facial expressions.

While it's mildly surprising that Nintendo licensed this at all, it's easily argued that the game's infamous reputation is the result of things being blown out of proportion. That's what happens when you listen to the Internet and perfectly-pitched advertising, kids.

PlayStation 2

SUPPLIED BY PLAY-ASIA.COM

のだめカンタービレ

Nodame Cantabile



Publisher: Banpresto
Developer: Banpresto
Release Date: 7/19/2007

Genre(s): Rhythm/Adventure
Category: Women's Anime
of Players: 1

Review by KouAidou









Nodame Cantabile is based off an anime which you probably haven't heard of. We certainly hadn't. The manga the anime was based on from comes from the *josei* genre, meaning that it's targeted mostly towards women in their college years or later. Nevertheless, we thought the concept sounded intriguing enough that it might be worth a look here at HGM.

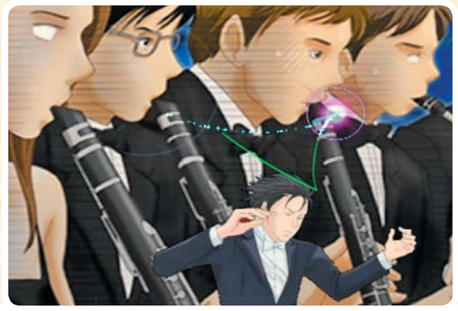
The game follows the anime's plotline, which centers around Shinichi Chiaki, a brilliant but arrogant musician who hopes one day to become a professional conductor, but who is hindered by a crippling fear of travel. Things start to change when he meets the pianist Megumi Noda (AKA Nodame), whose overly carefree nature contrasts with his fastidiously controlled lifestyle. Though it sounds like your typical "opposites attract" relationship drama, *Nodame* succeeds by portraying both characters as deeply flawed people governed by more than just their primary character trait.

Though the plot summary might lead you to expect a datesim, the game is actually centered around a series of rhythm-game like "Concert" portions, which are given context by text-heavy "Adventure" portions which precede them. Contrary to what the name would suggest, the Adventure portions are little more than glorified cutscenes that occasionally ask you to engage in annoying button-pressing minigames which you can't lose, have no real effect on the game's events whatsoever, and just serve to slow down the otherwise entertaining plot developments.

The Concert portions comprise the real "meat" of the game, and things fare a bit better here. Playing as Chiaki, the conductor of an orchestra, you'll need to lead the group through such classics as the theme from "Swan Lake" and "The Flight of the Bumblebee," regulating the group's tempo, volume, and rhythm through proper manipulation of the face buttons and analog sticks. It's simple but effective; the music will really follow your lead, so there's a certain sense of personal satisfaction when you've conducted well.

Unfortunately, a sense of satisfaction is all you get, as your performance during the concerts also has no actual effect on the rest of the story. Completing a song unlocks it for you to replay in free-play mode, and a great performance unlocks extras like production art, but the fact that characters will react to you the same way regardless of whether you turn in a bad or a transcendent performance makes the whole story-based concept seem even more pointless.

It's sad, too, because the story is clearly full of dynamic characters and amusing situations, and a game that really put you in the middle of that could have been really enjoyable. As it is, *Nodame Cantabile* squanders its potential by falling back on a fairly average rhythm game, bridged together by story segments whose "gameplay" additions hurt more than they help.



Worth Importing?

If you happen to be interested in *Nodame Cantabile*'s story, it may be worth checking out, as it provides you a fairly good short introduction to the anime. There's very little actual game here, though, so don't feel bad about skipping it, either.

FINAL SCORE: 2.5 of 5

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REVIEW



Tanner is back in his usual form as the undercover cop poised to infiltrate and take down bad guys all over. This time around, he's made his way to the City of Angels and is looking to bring down the Los Angeles Mafia.

Traveling a huge 3D city that barely resembles L.A., there are over 30 missions to undertake, either on foot or while driving. These missions are usually bundled into groups of four per in-game objective, and while they offer variety none of them are very long. This is Mobile, after all.



Driving missions are standard fare: racing from point A to point B, chasing down other vehicles and destroying them, and following or evading target vehicles. Mission length varies, but all let you drive around town in some sweet rides, each with different stats that can be improved. Your vehicles can take damage while you do all that running around, but you can also stop at the local mechanic shop and get that taken care of so that the mission doesn't end in disaster.



The neat thing about driving missions is that you can take out the bad guys by driving and shooting at the same time. With a quick press of the button, Tanner will lean out the window and fill your enemies full of lead. Targeting is automatic, so that you can concentrate on driving, but you can still just hit your nitro button and ram the car instead.

While on foot, most of the missions just call for running around, hiding behind cover, and shooting the town up. Again, targeting is automatic, and the missions are brief, but it breaks up the driving missions nicely.



The graphics use solid colors for the backdrop and some shading for vehicles, and that gives a unique look to the entire experience. You only hear music while you play the game, with no explosion or gun effects, and that's a real disappointment.



In any case, *Driver L.A. Undercover* has some quality action sequences, blending driving with chases, gunfire, jumps, speed and smash-ups. The foot missions are a bit forgettable and only serve to break up the driving action. There's some unlockable content, like vehicles, locations and separate mission modes, so this game has unusual replay value for a Mobile title.

Publisher: Gameloft
Developer: Gameloft
Release Date: 5/11/2007
Genre: GTA Clone
Category: Driving
of Players: 1

FINAL SCORE: 3.5 of 5

Splitfish
FragFX
• Nunchuck/Mouse combo for PS3 • Price: $59.99

Reviews by DJPubba



Features
Full SIXAXIS functionality
Programmable motion
Every PS3 button is here



Let me start out by saying that I am a hardcore PC keyboard/mouse FPS shooter-dood. I can't stand playing console FPS games with an analog stick. It drives me nuts when I try.

Therefore, when I heard about the FragFX, I was interested, yet wary. I have tried console pseudo-mice before — specifically, the SmartJoy Frag for Xbox with *Halo*. The results were usable but no substitute for proper mouse support built into the game. I patiently waited for the PC version of *Halo* instead.

Before I go any further, let me say "WTF?!" to whoever decided to not give their blessing for mouse support in FPS console games. I mean, come *on*, people! You support a mouse for console web browsing but not in-game? I just don't get it.

I got my FragFX, cut open the evil hand-stabbing plastic packaging everyone uses nowadays, plugged 'er into the PS3 and booted *Resistance*. No-workie. The controls didn't do squat but there was a flashing blue button. A quick scan of the included instruction pamphlet revealed that you have to turn the thing on by pressing the flashing blue button. Okay. Now it's working.

I noted a sensitivity dial on the nunchuck and predicted that I'd be using it pretty quickly. I was right. The default setting felt really bad. Moving the mouse quickly resulted in a molasses-like movement of the cross hair and moving it slowly resulted in short, rapid jerky movements. I fiddled with both the game's sensitivity and the FragFX's and found a usable balance. Unfortunately, no amount of fiddling gave me the smooth, precise mousing I'm used to with my Logictech G5 on the PC.

On top of that, the circle, square, triangle and X buttons are located right where I normally grip the mouse with my thumb so I had to constantly be wary of not holding the mouse too hard or I'd accidently hit a button I didn't want. This resulted in cramping pretty quickly.

In summary, if you're a hardcore PC mouser, keep sending those petitions to console makers for real mouse support.



Quasimoto (www.Quasimoto.com)
Quasicon
• Arcade-style Controller • Price: $199.00

Features
Analog buttons and sticks
Button layout inserts for each system
Memory card slots for Xbox
Supported platforms: PS2, Xbox, GameCube, PC (plus PS3 and 360 with adapters sold separately)

The Quasicon is an arcade-style controller designed for use with modern home consoles. There are tons of arcade sticks on the market that will plug into nearly anything you want them to, but there is a big difference between those and this: *this has analog sticks and buttons* in addition to the standard digital 8-way joysticks.

This is actually quite remarkable and probably the reason behind the hefty price tag. As far as I know, analog arcade buttons do not exist in the arcade and analog joysticks are exceedingly rare. Quasimoto has manufactured their own analog arcade buttons and sticks. This makes the Quasicon unlike any other arcade controller there is. All of their competition uses buttons and arcade hardware that anyone who wanted to build their own arcade stick could obtain for themselves from HappControls.com.

The idea is fantastic, but how does the controller stack up in real-world use? Arguably, the main reason anyone would want an arcade stick is to play fighting games. With that in mind, I invited Racewing over, who still hasn't come down from the buzz he got from the MAS arcade stick I converted to work on Xbox for him. Race and I went one-on-one in a quick *SFA3* match and it was immediately clear that, while the Quasicon is a 1000% improvement over a gamepad, its springy analog buttons weren't quite as silky-sweet as the MAS stick's standard arcade buttons. However, the digital 8-ways seemed just as good and the button layout was okay considering how many were present.

After Racewing left, I fired up a FPS, a third-person shooter and a racing game. All played well with the analog sticks, which actually provided an even more precise measure of control over their gamepad counterparts, due to their additional shaft length. The sticks are a little close together, but not uncomfortably so. The analog buttons worked about as well as the real ones on a PS2 Dual Shock, which is not saying much. Just like those, the difference between pressing softly and pressing hard is so small that you wouldn't really know they were analog unless someone told you. The whole concept of analog buttons seems gimmicky and largely unsupported to me anyway, so having them on this stick really seems to be just for the sake of completeness.

The Quasicon is designed for the perfectionist who wants an arcade controller that can completely replace the original gamepad on their current-gen console. It is that which the Quasicon delivers and more, with many other little features I wish I had more room to talk about here. I'll probably hack a trackball and spinner (and some artwork!) onto mine for the complete retro package.

RENEGADE KID:
NO KIDDING AROUND



To leave the comfort of a fulltime job, where you receive benefits and a steady paycheck is crazy, right? Well, yes it is. To be an independent developer is both thrilling and scary, and it takes a little bit of crazy to step out. Renegade Kid's co-founders, Jools Watsham and Gregg Hargrove, had to embrace their inner madness and hold on for dear life when they decided to fund the development of ***Dementium: The Ward*** with the hope that a nice publisher would come along, package it up, and put it on the shelf. Here, the maniacal minds behind Renegade Kid offer advice to all those thinking of starting their own game studio.

Jools Watsham: Creative independence has been a dream of mine for a long time. I have been designing, creating artwork, and writing music for games ever since my Dad purchased a ZX Spectrum in 1982, when I was eight years old. My passion for playing and making games has only grown over the years. Gregg and I first spoke of starting our own game studio over ten years ago. We were both young(er) and dumb(er) then; it was just a dream. To be honest, it's a good thing that dream didn't come true too quickly. Dog only knows what kind of a mess we'd be in if we had gone independent any sooner than now. Experience is the key when it comes to putting your life, wife, and kids in the risky hands of the video game industry.

My belief is that to start and maintain a successful video game company, you have to create games that people want to play. Pretty obvious, right? So, in order to keep my thoughts on track I always make sure my game concepts please the three P's. If my game doesn't please the three P's, then the development risk may be too high, and I may end up wasting a lot of time and money. P number ***one*** is the ***public***. If the public doesn't want my game, then no one's going to buy it, and I'll go out of business quicker than you can say "Why did you make that game, man? No one wants to play it!" P number ***two*** is the ***publisher***. Video games are a business. If my game isn't sexy to a publisher (translation: $ellable), then I'm dead in the water, no matter how 'good' the game may be. P number ***three*** is the ***press***. Other people's opinions matter to most people, so if the press likes my game, more people will start talking about it.

Gregg Hargrove: I began as an artist with a love of comic books. I never put too much thought into video games because like most people at the time, I had no idea what actually went into making one. My family never even had a computer as I was growing up so I had no idea what they could actually do artistically. Don't get me wrong, I loved games. I spent every quarter I had down at the local arcade, but they were just magic! No one actually made them, they just "were." However, fate being as twisted as it is, I found myself as an adult making them for a living and I was hooked! Talk about growth! Every project was a different challenge with new, exciting, and even terrifying possibilities. Almost from the beginning I wanted to steer the ship, but honestly had little idea what that actually meant. Just learning how to make compelling art for a game was hard enough and little did I know that was just the tip of the iceberg. I would have crashed right into that sucker if I had been allowed to take command at that early stage.

The most important thing I've learned through many projects has been compromise. Compromise is a tricky term to bandy about and many artists will puff their chests out and wail, "I will never compromise my artistic integrity!" That's not what I mean. You should always want your art to be the best it can be. I wanted every game I worked on to look glorious! Does that mean that I should get to do whatever I want even now that I get to call those shots? No. The game must come first. Jools talks about the three Ps and that's a hard fact to get your artsy brain around but it's crucial when embarking on a commercial venture. The trick is to learn to use the creativity you rely on as an artist and find a way that satisfies those three Ps and still compels your sensibilities as an artist. Never give up you dreams, never sell your soul, but find a way to make it all work together.



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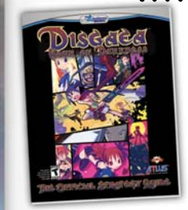
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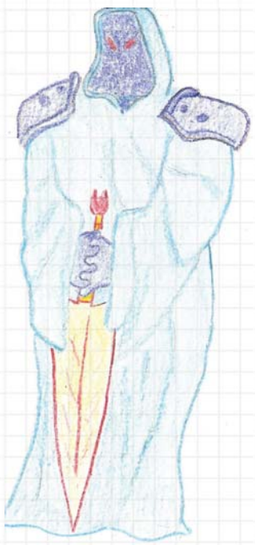
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